QUEERING CHINA: TRANSNATIONAL GENDERS AND SEXUALITIES

QUEER LITERATURE IN THE SINOSPHERE

Edited by Hongwei Bao & Yahia Zhengtang Ma

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QUEER LITERATURE IN THE SINOSPHERE

QUEERING CHINA

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INTRODUCTION: QUEER LITERATURE IN THE SINOSPHERE

Hongwei Bao and Yahia Ma

There has been a proliferation of queer Chinese-language literary works in the first three decades of the twenty-first century, in tandem with the increasing translation, circulation and criticism of these works globally. In 2023 alone, Taipei-based publisher Showwe (秀威) republished two short story collections by Cui Zi'en[1] (崔子恩) and another two books (a short story collection and a poetry collection) by Mu Cao (墓草).[2] This coincides with the publication of the English translation of Wang Xiaobo's (王小波) novella *Golden Age* by Penguin Classics[3] and Cui Zi'en's short story collection *Platinum Bible of the Public Toilet* by Duke University Press.[4] Most of these works are not new, as they have been previously published in Mainland China, officially or unofficially, since the 1990s. But the republication and translation of these works bring renewed attention to how non-normative desires, sexualities and identities are represented and mediated in literary forms; they also showcase the richness and diversity of queer literature in the Sinosphere.

We use the term 'queer' to denote a broad range of gender, sexuality and intimacy that do not fit into heterosexual norms, including but not limited to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people and communities. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's words, 'queer' denotes 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses, and excess of meaning [that occur] when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically'.[5] This book adopts a broad understanding of literature, from award-winning, internationally known texts such as the works of Qiu Miaojin to popular online texts such as *danmei* (耽美 Boys' Love) novel *The Little Mushroom* (小蘑菇) and Girls' Love novel *Pink Affairs* (绯色事). It hopes to break the rigid boundaries of literary and popular texts, print and internet literature, and attend to the multifaceted dimensions of queer and literary articulations. Our contributing authors come from different disciplines and scholarly fields; their scholarly approaches often differ vastly from one another: from a focus on the text, theme and genre, to the sociology and anthropology of literary and cultural production. Together, they demonstrate the 'worldliness' of queer literature, firmly anchored in the world and yet also creating new worlds.

We also use the term 'queer literature' broadly to encompass a wide range of literary forms, aesthetics and expressions. They include: *tongxing'ai* (同性愛, literally same-sex love, meaning homosexual) literature in the early twentieth century, the emergence and proliferation of *tongzhi* (同志, literally meaning common will, often translated into English as comrade[6]) literature in the 1980s and 1990s, and the proliferation of *ku'er* (酷兒, a transliteration of the English term 'queer') literature after 2000. *Tongxing'ai* literature, *tongzhi* literature and *ku'er* literature can all be translated into 'queer literature' in English, but they denote different subjectivities, literary expressions, gender and sexual politics. For example, *tongxing'ai* literature often explores gender ambiguity and same-sex intimacy before the emergence of the gay identity discourse; *tongzhi* literature often has an emphasis on gay identity politics, while *ku'er* literature draws heavily on a post-identitarian queer politics. These distinctions are not clear cut, and the categories have a great deal of overlap. This book does not privilege one category over another; it seeks to explore their porous boundaries and creative synergies. Through nuanced analysis of literary works, our

contributing authors shed light on the complexity of gender and sexual identity, literary expression and politics, as well as the impossibility of clearly defining gender, identity and desire.

While it is perfectly possible to use terms such as ‘queer Chinese literature’, or ‘queer Sinophone literature’ for our book title, we are keenly aware of the potential controversy associated with both terms and propose to use the phrase ‘queer literature in the Sinosphere’ instead. The term ‘queer Chinese literature’ may risk privileging queer literature from the People’s Republic of China (PRC); ‘queer Sinophone literature’, on the other hand, often excludes queer literature from the PRC altogether.[7] The phrase ‘queer literature in the Sinosphere’ encompasses literature in the broader Chinese cultural world, including but not limited to the PRC. The Sinosphere traditionally refers to the region of East and Southeast Asia that has been significantly shaped by relations with China throughout history.[8] More recently, Chris Berry uses the term ‘Sinosphere’ to discuss films that could be seen as transnational Chinese cinema but not necessarily made in a Sinitic language and also films that respond to or contest the impact of the PRC’s globalization project.[9] We hope that the use of the conceptual term ‘Sinosphere’ can help bypass political and ideological divisions and open up transnational and transcultural dialogues vis-à-vis queer literature; it also serves as one of the scholarly contributions of the book to bypass the Chinese/Sinophone dichotomy.

In this introductory chapter of the book, we first trace a brief literary history in the Sinosphere, focusing on the modern and the contemporary eras. We then review major scholarship in English on the topic, identifying the book’s scholarly contributions to the study of queer literature in the Sinosphere. This is followed by a brief overview of the book’s key themes, topics and arguments.

A brief queer literary history

There is a long-standing history of homoeroticism in the Sinosphere.[10] Classical texts which explicitly depicted same-sex intimacy between men or women were found in ancient China. For example, Qing dynasty writer Pu Songling’s (蒲松齡) short story collection 聊齋志異 (*liao zhai zhi yi*, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*) portrays same-sex intimacy between human beings and metamorphosizing animal spirits. Qing dynasty playwright Li Yu’s (李漁) play 蓮香伴 (*lian xiang ban*, *The Fragment Companion*) depicts same-sex intimacy between women. Qing dynasty novelist Cao Xueqin’s (曹雪芹) literary classic 紅樓夢 (*hong lou meng, The Dream of The Red Chamber*) features male homoeroticism between masters and servants. Same-sex intimacy also abounded in ancient Chinese erotic literature such as the Ming Dynasty erotica 金瓶梅 (*jin ping mei, The Golden Lotus*) by Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng (蘭陵笑笑生) and Chen Sen’s (陳森) 品花寶鑒 (*pin hua bao jian*, *Treasures of Flowers*).[11]

As Tze-lan Sang notes in her book *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*, intimate homoerotic relationships gained ‘unprecedented topicality’ in Republican China during the 1920s; they were ‘debated in terms of the neologism same-sex love’ in the major intellectual journals about women’s changing economic, social, sexual and political status.[12] Female same-sex relationship during the Republican Era, which was formerly negligible and insignificant in the patriarchal familial organization of traditional Chinese culture, became distinctively associated with feminism and psychological abnormality at the same time.[13] During the period, beyond depicting homoerotic romance, short stories by May Fourth female authors such as Lu Yin (廬隱) and Ding Ling (丁玲) provided a flexible alternative to the male homosexuality-dominated works on *tongxing’ai*. These works accommodated critical understandings about the meaning of *tongxing’ai* and *tongxing’ai* literature. Scholarly works on literature of this period, including

those of Tze-lan Sang and Fran Martin,[14] have provided valuable insights into how to situate queer literature in the global narratives of gender and sexuality.

Literary representations of same-sex intimacy at the time included Yu Dafu's (郁達夫) 1922 short story 茫茫夜 (*mangmang ye*, Deep Night), Yuan Muzhi's (袁牧之) play 等邊三角形 (*deng bian sanjiaoxing*, 'Equilateral Triangle') and Li Jinfa's (李金發) homoerotic poems published in the inaugural issue of the *Aesthetic Education* (美育雜志) magazine. In the novella titled 她是一個弱女子 (*ta shi yige ruo nüzi*, 'She Was a Weak Woman'), male writer Yu Dafu depicted a tomboy figure as the embodiment of gender and sexual deviance.

The emergence of *tongzhi* literature in Mainland China and Taiwan since the 1980s opened up unprecedented possibilities for addressing issues of power, identity, gender and sexuality in different social contexts and global configurations. When cultural and literary productions, neologism, theoretical formations and social activism around non-normative genders and sexualities began to proliferate in the 1980s and 1990s, first in Taiwan and Hong Kong and then in Mainland China, they, as Andrea Bachner notes, challenged 'heteronormative patterns by having recourse to Western models and renegotiating these with locally and culturally specific formations'.[15] The term 'queer' of queer theory and queer literature, as Fran Martin notes, appeared in academic and literary productions in the mid-1990s and connected 'a conceptual dialogue with Euro-American post-structuralist critiques of identity politics as well as a literary aesthetic'.[16] It prepared the way for the golden age of *tongzhi* literature in 1990s Taiwan, a genre 'consisting of literary works featuring homosexuality', as defined by queer writer and scholar Ta-wei Chi. Before the 1990s, Pai Hsien-yung's novel 孽子 (*Nie zi*, translated into English as *Crystal Boys* by Howard Goldblatt) was published in 1983. It has since been considered as a foundational, classic text for the representation of homosexuality in Taiwan. During the 1990s, a new generation of queer authors including Ta-wei Chi, Lucifer Hong and Chen Xue subscribed to 'the deconstruction of anticipated categories of genders and sexual identity',[17] as noted by Martin, in the context of growing feminist, and queer movements in Taiwan.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Hong Kong writers, 'hailing from what previously was often considered a "cultural wasteland" by Hong Kong and non-Hong Kong intellectuals alike', assumed great visibility within Chinese literary circles, as noted by Patricia Sieber.[18] For example, Hong Kong writer Lilian Lee (李碧華)'s 1985/1992/1993 novel 霸王別姬 (*ba wang bie ji*, *Farewell My Concubine*) (and the film adaptation of the same title), drawing inspiration from Chinese homoerotic literature and culture[19] and depicting a process of feminization and its association with homoerotic desire in the setting of Peking opera, has long since become a classic and accepted as a model of film adaptation. As Liang Luo points out, Lee's 1986 novel 青蛇 (*Green Snake*), foregrounds the androgenous Green Snake as both a dancer and a writer.[20] In 1994, Wong Bik-wan (黃碧雲), another prolific writer who has emerged in the late 1980s Hong Kong literary scene, published her first collection of fiction 她是女子, 我也是女子 (*ta shi nüzi, wo ye shi nüzi*, *She is a Young Woman, So am I*) and the short story of the same title has been translated into English by Naifei Ding.[21] It depicts the female narrator Yip Saisai's desire of creating a social space for an intimacy between herself and another female character.

At the same time, queer literature emerged in Mainland China against the backdrop of numerous milestones of LGBTQ rights such as the 1997 revocation of the criminal code of hooliganism, which is often hailed as the decriminalization of homosexuality in Mainland China. Queer literature in the 1990s was revolutionary given the complicated sociocultural, political economic circumstances. It creates, as Petrus Liu argues, 'a euphoric feeling about the 1990s as a moment of queer heteroglossia, carnival, subversion, efflorescence, and free play',[22] which can be seen in novels and short stories such as Lin Bai (林白)'s 一個人的戰爭 (*yigeren de zhanzheng, One Person's War*), Chen Ran (陳染)'s *Private Life* (*siren shenghuo*, 私人生活) and Liu Suola (刘索拉)'s novella 藍天綠海 (*lantian lühai*, 'Blue Sky Green Sea').

Some of these works deployed techniques of literary modernism and infused a strong psychoanalytic undertone. Fran Martin attributes Liu Suola's use of the Freudian vocabulary to 'the loss of the female same-sex attachment which could not be mourned' in the post-Mao era; this constitutes another expression of the 'utopian memorialism of the Chinese going-in story'.[23] Sang suggests that, against the backdrop of the postsocialist context, these women authors produced the 'third space of female homoerotic fiction' from socially marginalized perspectives and a strong diasporic sensibility.[24] Although not explicitly queer-identified, Wang Xiaobo's (王小波) literary works such as 黑鐵時代 (*heitie shidai*, *The Iron Age*) contain strong homoerotic themes and a distinct sadomasochism imaginary. Wang's works are highly political and allegorical. For example, the sadomasochism element in Wang's works, as Hongling Zhang and Jason Sommer point out, functions 'not as a space for rebellion, but as a metaphor for state power and voluntary and even enthusiastic collaboration of its subjects'.[25] Wang's novella 似水柔情 (*sishui rouqing*, 'Sentiments Like Water') was subsequently adapted into a stage play and a screen script by Wang Xiaobo and Zhang Yuan (張元) and this laid the foundation for Zhang Yuan's 1996 film *East Palace, West Palace* (東宮, 西宮), the first explicit gay film in Mainland China.

In the 1990s, China's urban commercial presses also welcomed popular novels such as Wei Hui's (衛慧) 上海寶貝 (*shanghai baobei*, *Shanghai Baby*, the English translation by Bruce Humes came out in 2001[26]), Mian Mian's (棉棉) 糖 (*tang, Candy*), and Mu Zimei's (木子美) 遺情書 (*yiqing shu*, *Ashes of Love*). These writers were often referred to as 'beauty writers' (美女作家) and their works as 'body writing' (身體寫作), or more dismissively, 'lower body writing' (下半身寫作). These popular novels were often controversial in Chinese society and among literary critics, but they raised public awareness about issues of gender, sexuality and women's desire.

Several lesbian-themed novels were published around 2000. Most of these stories were first published online and later in print after the internet novel had gained popularity and garnered a fan base. There is no consensus regarding which text counts as the first explicitly lesbian-identified novel. Ge Zi's (格子) 1999 novel 迷情的日子 (*miqing de rizi*, *Confused Days*) was often celebrated as the first lesbian-themed novel in Mainland China. Zhang Haoyin's (張浩音) 2003 novel 上海往事 (*Shanghai wangshi*, *Once Upon a Time in Shanghai*) was marketed by the publisher as the first of its kind. For literary critic Du Fan, Hai Lan's (海藍) 2005 novel 我的天使我的愛 (*wode tianshi wode ai*, *My Angel, My Love*) is the first lesbian novel in post-Mao China in a strict sense, as the story is marked by a strong lesbian subjectivity owing to the author's clear identification with the lesbian identity.[27] Other lesbian-themed novels published in the 2000s included Mei Xin's (梅心) *For Whom the Red Bean Reddens* (紅豆為誰紅), Tianlan Ruokong's (天藍若空) 不分 (*bu fen*, *Versatile*) and Wang Chao's (王朝) 2007 novel 花自飄落水自流 (*hua zi piaoluo shui zi liu*, *As Fallen Flowers Drift and Water Runs Its Way*).

Despite the proliferation of queer literary representations in the 1980s and 1990s, very few authors openly identified as gay, lesbian or queer. The year 1997 marked a watershed year in contemporary Chinese queer literature. In February 1997, a collection of short stories titled 他他她她的故事 (*ta ta ta ta de gushi*, *The Stories of He and He and She and She*) was published in Hong Kong. The anthology collected queer writings from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, including Tong Ge's (童戈) short story 追逐斜陽 (*zhui zhu xieyang*, 'Chasing the Sunset'). In May 1997, Cui Zi'en (崔子恩) published his novel 桃色嘴唇 (*tao se zuichun*, *Peach-Coloured Lips*). Later that year, Tong Ge published his collection of short stories 好男羅格 (*hao nan luo ge, Good Guy Luo Ge*). Tong's collection included his best-known story 戰地 (*zhan di*, 'The Battlefield'), which depicts a homoerotic relationship between two soldiers fighting on the frontline of the Vietnam War. Both Cui and Tong openly identify as gay or queer; their sexual subjectivities are unambiguously manifested in their literary works.

Cui Zi'en is a prolific writer, filmmaker, literary critic and queer activist. He has published a dozen collections of short stories, novellas, screen plays and critical essays. His works include 三角城的童话 (*san jiao cheng de tonghua*, *Tales of the Triangle City*), 丑角登場 (*chou jue deng chang, Enter the Clown*, 1998), 玫瑰床榻 (*meigui chuangta*, *Bed of Roses*, 1998), 我愛史大勃 (*wo ai shi dabo*, *I Love Shi Dabo*), 舅舅的人間煙火 (*jiujiu de renjian yanhuo*, *Uncle's Secular Life*), 僞科幻故事 (*wei kehuan gushi*, *Pseudo Science-Fiction*), 紅桃A吹響號角 (*hong tao A chui xiang haojiao*, *The Heart Blows the Trumpet*) and 胭脂的下落 (*yanzhi de xialuo*, *The Whereabouts of Rouge*). Most of these books were published by Mainland Chinese literary and commercial presses at a time when censorship of queer texts was relatively loose. Through vivid language and skilful storytelling, Cui constructs an imaginary world of the 'three cities' in north China. This is an enchanted world of childhood innocence, family legends and youth love. It is a queer utopia where gender and sexual fluidity is celebrated, and social norms are challenged. The stories are original, meticulously conceptualized and masterfully narrated; they often carry a profound sense of absurdity, humour and wisdom. These stories exemplify what Petrus Liu calls 'Chinese queer theory', an original way of conceptualizing gender, sex and sexuality outside the Western queer theory canon,[28] and what Hongwei Bao terms 'queer vitalism', a philosophy celebrating queer life and creative energy.[29]

Mu Cao (墓草) is another prolific novelist and poet in the PRC. Writing from a rural and migrant worker's perspective, Mu Cao's works depict the harsh realities of the working-class and migrant queer lives at the margins of Chinese society. His writings challenge the urban centrism of Chinese queer culture and are reminiscent of the 'forgotten critical realism'.[30] Mu Cao has published 棄兒 (*qi er*, *Outcasts*), 棄兒湖 (*qi er hu*, *The Lake of Outcasts*), 人妖時代 (*renyao shidai*, *The Age of Human-Monsters*), 葵花寶典 (*kuihua baodian*, *A Treasured Book of Sunflowers*), 墓草詩選 (*mu cao shixuan, Selected Poems of Mu Cao*) and 一千個藍宇的尖叫 (*yiqian ge lanyu de jianjiao*, *Scream of a Thousand Lan Yus*). Mu Cao's novel *Outcast* was published in English in 2019, translated by Scott Myers under the title of *In the Face of Death We Are Equal*. Queer identified authors in the early 2000s also included Bei Cun's (北村) novel 玻璃 (*boli*, *Glass*) and Lu Ming's (魯明) novella 背道而馳 (*bei dao er chi*, 'Running the Opposite Way'), both published by Mainland Chinese presses.

Perhaps one of the earliest and most important internet novels in the Chinese-speaking world is 北京故事 (Beijing gushi, *Beijing Story*), written by Xiao He (筱禾; pen name: Beijing Comrades 北京同志) and serialized on a now-defunct gay website called Chinese Men and Boys Sky (中國男人男孩天空) in 1998.[31] The novel narrates a ten-year love entanglement between a poor university student and a rich businessman in the 1980s and 1990s Beijing. The story was adapted into a film titled *Lan Yu* (藍宇) by Hong Kong queer film director Stanley Kwan (關錦鵬) and the internet novel was translated into English by Scott Myers and published under the title of *Beijing Comrades*.[32] Petrus Liu sees the novel as resisting an assimilating gay identity politics and articulating a 'cultural fantasy about the separability of love and money in social relations'.[33] Bao reads the novel as a 'postsocialist allegory of queer becoming' in which the two characters' identification with gay identity coincides with China's historical experience of postsocialism.[34]

As a distinct popular literary genre, *danmei* (*tanbi* in Japanese, 耽美 in Chinese), aka Boys' Love, which often features homoerotic love between beautiful young men, plays an important role in raising the public awareness of queer issues.[35] In 1999, China's first *danmei* website Lucifer Club (露西弗俱樂部) was established. In the same year, Sunsun published the first *danmei* novel 世紀末,最後的流星雨 (*shiji mo zuihou de liuxingyu*, *The Last Meteor Shower at the End of the Century*). Other popular online *danmei* platforms include Jinjiang Literature City (晉江文學城), Changpei Literature (長佩文學網), NetEase Lofter (網易樂乎) and the Chinese video streaming website Bilibili. Literary works published on these

platforms include Xiao He's 2013 novel 混亂 (*hun luan*, *Confusion*), a Boys' Love story, and 绯色事 (*fei se shi, Pink Affairs*) written by Clockwork Orange 521 (發條橙521) and serialized on the fan website Pink Super Girl Bar (粉色超女吧) in 2006 and 2007, which is one of the best-known Girls' Love stories.[36] Our contributor Jamie J. Zhao will discuss the latter in this book.

In the 2010s, some successful Boys' Love stories were adapted into popular web dramas. They included 你丫上瘾了 (*ni ya shangyin le*, *Are You Addicted*) authored by Chai Jidan (柴雞蛋) and serialized from 2013 on the online platform LRead, and later adapted to a web drama under the title of 上瘾 (*shangyin*, *Addicted*) in 2016; 鎮魂 (*zhen hun*, *Guardian*), authored by Priest and streamed on the Chinese video streaming website Youku in 2018; and 魔道祖師 (*mo dao zushi*, *The Grand Master of Demonic Cultivation*) written by Moxiang Tongxiu (墨香銅臭), later adapted to a web drama titled 陳情令 (*chen qing ling*, *The Untamed*) and streamed on Tencent Video in 2019.

Most of these *danmei* authors use pseudonyms for publishing to minimize the legal risk. Under the Chinese law, erotica is seen as a form of pornography; publishing and selling pornography still constitute a criminal offence. In 2018, novelist Tian Yi (天一) was given a ten-and-a-half-year prison sentence because of the commercial sale of her novel 攻占 (*gongzhan*, *Occupy*). In 2020, a Boys' Love novel titled 下墜 (*xia zhui*, *Downing*), authored by MaiLeDiDiDi (麦乐迪迪迪) and published on the international website Archive of Our Own (AO3), was reported to the Chinese authorities by fans of the Chinese pop star Xiao Zhan (肖戰), claiming the novel had stigmatized Xiao with its homoerotic depictions. In September 2021, China's broadcasting regulator, the National Radio and Television Administration, issued a ban on *danmei*-adapted dramas on Chinese television. Although *danmei* is only one form of queer text, the ban of *danmei* has had a chilling effect on the production and consumption of queer literature in the PRC. Queer literature remains popular in Chinese cyberspace. However, its popularity among the readers forms a sharp contrast to the hostile political and social environment for queer existence in Mainland China. Under these circumstances, writing and reading queer texts can become a form of queer activism, and it constructs a queer community of practice and resistance.

Travelling outside the Sinosphere, since the 1990s, Chinese-language queer literature, especially those from Mainland China and Taiwan, has been translated into English and other languages and translation plays a central role in the circulation of queer literature in Chinese language globally. For example, Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin's English translation of Chu T'ien-wen's 1994 novel 荒人手記 (*huang ren shouji*, *Notes of a Desolate Man*) was published by Columbia University Press in 1999. The 2003 queer anthology *Angelwings: Contemporary Queer Fiction from Taiwan* edited and translated by Fran Martin includes ten short stories first published in the 1990s, such as the Taiwanese lesbian author Qiu Miaojin (also Romanized as Chiu Miao-chin)'s 柏拉圖之發 (*bo la tu zhi fa*, Platonic Hair), Hsu Yoshen's 岸邊石 (*an bian shi*, Stones on the Shore), Ta-wei Chi's 一個陌生人的身分證明 (*yige moshengren de shenfen zhengming*, A Stranger's ID) and Wu Jiwen's 玫瑰是復活的過去式 (*meigui shi fuhuo de guoqu shi*, Rose is the Past Tense of Rise).[37] The 2007 edition of *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* edited by Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt also included a selection of translated Chinese-language queer texts from the 1990s, including an excerpt from Qiu Miaojin's novel 蒙馬特遺書 (*mengmate yishu*, *Last Word from Montmartre*)[38] and Chu T'ien-wen's 世紀末的華麗 (*shiji mo de huali*, *Fin de Siècle Splendour*).[39] Queer literature from Hong Kong has been on the margins of Chinese-language literature and also in translation in the context of what Alvin Wong calls 'the infrastructure of world literature'.[40] In addition to Lilian Lee's 霸王別姬 (*ba wang bie ji*), being translated into English as *Farewell My Concubine* by Andrea Lingenfelter, Wong Bik-wan's short story 她是女子,我也是女子 (*ta shi nüzi, wo ye shi nüzi*, 'She Is a Young Woman and

So Am I') appeared in *Red Is Not the Only Colour: Contemporary Chinese Fiction on Love and Sex between Women, Collected Stories,* and Ma Kai Fa (馬家輝)'s 2016 novel 龍頭鳳尾 (*long tou feng wei*, *The Head of a Dragon and the Tail of a Phoenix*) has been translated by Stéphane Lévêque and Jean-Claude Pastor into French as *Hong Kong Gang* (2019). A fascinating example of queer literature from Hong Kong, however, is the Hong Kong writer Ye Zhiwei's debut novel 突然獨身 (*tu ran du shen*, *Suddenly Single*). Originally written in Cantonese and first published by Kubrick in Hong Kong in 2002, the novel was translated into traditional Chinese and republished by G Books in Taiwan in 2009, followed by an English translation being serialized online which is no longer available.[41] With the publication of *Wang in Love and Bondage: Three Novellas by Wang Xiaobo* edited and translated by Hongling Zhang and Jason Sommer,[42] *Queer Taiwanese Literature: A Reader* edited by Howard Chiang,[43] *Beijing Comrades* and *In the Face of Death We Are Equal* translated by Scott E. Myers,[44] *Golden Age* translated by Yan Yan,[45] *Platinum Bible of the Public Toilet* edited by Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel,[46] queer literature in the Sinosphere has continued to draw international attention.

Queer literary criticism

In the last two decades, scholars have championed a queer approach to literature.[47] They primarily focus on categories of gender, sexuality (such as male homosexuality), historical period (such as the 1990s), identity category (such as the *tongzhi* identity), sociocultural context (such as that of Taiwan) or a distinct mode of reading. Tze-lan Sang's work traces the history of representing female same-sex desire in modern Chinese history by highlighting the role of modernity and globalization in shaping queer writings.[48] Fran Martin's *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* studies the history of both male and female homosexuality as elements of broader patterns of same-sex love represented in literary and cultural productions in the emergence of modernity in Taiwan.[49] Martin brings critique that characterizes queer theory to the field of queer literature and culture in her analysis of queer representation in 1990s Taiwan, demonstrating that dissident sexualities in non-Western locations cannot be reduced to the homogenizing force of Westernization. Petrus Liu's study rethinks the relationship between Marxism and queer literature in Mainland China and Taiwan to argue against the 'thinking of queer theory as an exclusively Euro-American enterprise'.[50] For Liu, queer is not a synonym for homosexuality nor gay and lesbian, it refers to all non-heteronormative individuals and lives, such as polyamorous relationships and sex workers and many others. Similarly, in *From Amorous Histories to Sexual Histories: Tongzhi Writings and the Construction of Masculinities in Late Qing and Modern China* (從豔史到性史: 同志書寫與近現代中國的男性建構 in Chinese), through critical analysis of key *tongzhi* writings from the late Qing to modern and contemporary China, Wai Siam Hee demonstrates a distinction between what he calls Old Tongzhi and New Tongzhi.[51] Hee uses the concept *tongzhi* to expose the construction of masculinity outside the mainstream by connecting *tongzhi* to broader historical contexts, specifically, to the deep commitment of understanding an alternative history of masculinity construction in modern China. Ta-Wei Chi's *A Queer Invention in Taiwan: A History of Tongzhi Literature* (同志文學史:台灣的發明 in Chinese) sets out specifically to address questions of *tongzhi* literature in Taiwan as part of larger *tongzhi*/queer movements in Taiwan across time from the 1950s to the 2000s.[52] Hongwei Bao's *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture Under Postsocialism* examines the configuration of sexualities, desires and bodies in queer literary and visual works and social events in contemporary Mainland China. Bao considers how these diverse forms and practices produce distinct gender and sexual subjectivities unique to China's postsocialist conditions, and how these cultural productions function as a form of social

activism in a society where explicit forms of queer activism are seen as politically sensitive and risky.

All these works testify to sustained and renewed scholarly interest in queer literature in the Sinosphere at large and the urgency of establishing and developing the field of queer Chinese literary studies even though they are restricted by category, discipline, geography, convention, history and area studies division. This is in line with the almost exclusive dedication to a particular literary or cultural tradition in the existing anthologies of queer literature (oftentimes through translation), as evidenced by *Angelwings: Contemporary Queer Fiction from Taiwan* translated and edited by Fran Martin (2023), *Queer Taiwanese Literature: A Reader* edited by Howard Chiang (2021) and *Queer Time: A Special Notebook of Taiwanese Tongzhi Literature* edited by Ta-wei Chi and Ariel Chu (2021).

These enquiries have contributed not only to our understanding of literary representation of queer genders and sexualities but also to global elaboration and circulation of queer texts, concepts and genres beyond the borders. Queer theory can open up possibilities for mapping the complex overlapping of theoretical frameworks, the blurring of boundaries and the entanglement of methodologies, to connect the theoretical, the corporeal, the perceptual and the political dimensions. Central to our approach to queer literature is to stand in opposition to the rigid notions of binarism – such as China and the Sinosphone (in the sense of Shu-mei Shih's definitions of 'the Sinophone'[53]). With this, many of the studies included in this volume explore how the richness and diversity of queerness and queer literature in the Sinosphere have enabled new knowledge formations and interdisciplinary practices, and how the iconic, the under-studied or forgotten works can be studied from different, interdisciplinary and yet complementary perspectives. It is precisely in this context we hope to bring together queer literary works and criticism to explore alternative representations of queerness and also the authorial voices they project.

With such an inclusive, interdisciplinary approach, we choose to use the term 'queer literature' in the title. The use of terms such as *tongzhi* literature, queer literature, *tongzhi writing*, *tongzhi wenxue* in different chapters may initially appear inconsistent. However, this reflects the varied usage and multiple meanings of queer, which is multiple, unstable and constantly done and undone by language, norms and contexts. We use 'queer literature' to denote both queer approaches that challenge the minoritizing model of homosexuality as well as an umbrella term that emphasizes the diversity of desires and sexualities in Chinese communities in all forms. With this, this volume offers various points of departure that stand at the intersection of language, sexuality and gender in transnational, cultural contexts. We hope to document key authors and texts and analyse key works in a transnational context across time while exploring alternative knowledge about genders, desires, lived lives in various linguistic environments and literary histories.

Building on existing scholarship, the book aims to (1) break the boundaries between *tongxinglian* literature, *tongzhi* literature and queer literature, seeing them as literary works that explore gender fluidity and sexual diversity and that challenge social norms; (2) transgress national borders and geographical boundaries by focusing on the transnational flow of queer people, ideas and literary trends; (3) examine queer literature from transcultural theoretical perspectives, merging both Chinese and Western literary theoretical traditions; (4) challenge the distinction between high and low, serious and popular, print and online literatures. This book also places trans representation and women's writing at the fore of the discussion, celebrates a queer intersectional positionality (especially working-class queer people's lives), and facilitates writer-scholar dialogues. All these have to some extent been neglected in previous scholarship. They have helped make the book an innovative anthology of queer literary criticism in the twenty-first century.

An overview of the book

This book accommodates a diverse range of research materials, methods and intellectual paradigms. The fourteen chapters are divided into four sections: 'Trans Formation', 'Queer Women's Space', 'Queer Intersectionality' and 'In Queer Memory'. Overall, the chapters roughly follow a chronological order according to authors and works but we have also retained a considerable degree of ambiguity when such a clear trajectory is not always possible or desirable.

This volume begins with 'Trans Formation' by investigating transness, which is broadly understood as a multitude of gendered embodiment, narrative transition and transformation. In Chapter 1, Aixia Huang presents a trans re-reading of Ming-Qing male homoerotic literature by analysing the recurring temporal construction of trans-femininity in texts such as the late Ming drama 男王后 (*Nan Wanghou*, *The Male Queen*) and 男孟母教合三迁 (*Nan mengmu jiaohe sanqian*, *A Male Mencius' Mother Educates A Son and Moves House Three Times*). For Huang, the interwoven crossing of gender and time tends to go in two directions to develop the same-sex romance narrative and to help the protagonist rationalize their intimacy with men. Huang argues that this follows a forward temporal construction of the protagonist 'becoming trans', because entering a same-sex relationship in the narrative present allows the protagonist to further develop trans-femininity or actualize male-to-female gender-crossing. The temporal construction of trans-femininity also traces backward in time to reveal the protagonist in a male-male relationship as 'already trans', because gender-crossing had already taken place or was predestined in an anterior temporal location in the narrative past.

Dylan K. Wang's chapter reconstructs the textual histories and creative contexts of two Republican-era texts: 親愛的丈夫 (*qin ai de zhangfu,* 'Dear Husband', 1924) by Ding Xilin (丁西林) and 第二的母親 (*Di er de muqin*, 'A Second Mother', 1933) by Ba Jin (巴金). Previous studies have largely sidelined the phenomenon of cross-dressing in these literary works in favour of other issues. Drawing on Marjorie Garber's formulation of the 'third space of possibility', Wang explores the meanings of cross-dressing in modern Chinese literature and nation-building in the two texts. For Wang, narratives featuring 'transvestite figures' typically follow a situational logic: when safely confined within the invisible walls of the stage, they are indulged – idolized even; but when they venture out into the real world, chaos invariably ensues. The crossdresser is typically portrayed as an intruder, a threat to the normal patterns of gender and desire. It is the representation of such intrusions (and attempted intrusions) in early Republican literature that underpins Wang's chapter.

The elaboration of transness for understanding the multitude of transformation and transition extends to the life stories of trans celebrities. Yahia Ma's chapter discusses the framing of gender transition and transgender identity in *Shanghai Tango: A Memoir*, the 2007 translation of Jin Xing's 半夢: 金星自傳 (*Ban meng: jin xing zizhuan*, *Half Dream: Jin Xing's Autobiography*). The English translation, as Ma argues, raises fundamental questions about the act of framing, that is, the application of conceptual categories to make sense of people and events and to market representations of those lives to a readership. Drawing on the conceptualization of framing first developed by Erving Goffman and later adapted for translation studies by Mona Baker and Brian James Baer, the chapter explores how Jin and Texier's translation uses both linguistic and para-linguistic strategies to reframe Jin Xing's life story in and through translation. Through a close reading of the biography in Chinese and English, Ma argues that the enfolding of personal and public narratives within a metanarrative of China's transition to neoliberalism produces two rather different readings of Jin Xing's life story, one that appropriates heteronormative metanarratives to domesticate Jin Xing (as a wife and mother) and another that radically others her as an embodiment of sex and sexuality.

The second section, 'Queer Women's Space', asks how queer women can imagine their own space across genres and time. With a central focus on female same-sex love in Republican China, Yixin Liu's chapter reveals how the rise and fall of lesbian-themed fiction reflect the climax and decline of the May Fourth enlightenment zeitgeist. Liu analyses the

women writers Lu Yin (庐隐), Ling Shuhua (凌叔華) and Ding Ling (丁玲)'s literary works against the backdrop of the emergence of lesbian-themed fiction, which highlights a further construction of Republican Chinese women. Liu argues that the camouflaged stance on lesbianism, or what Tze-lan Sang would call 'the weak presentation of the real lesbianism', not only serves as a balance mechanism between ideological liberation and bodily desire that modern Chinese women endeavoured to seek but also marks an alternative exploration of the legitimacy of emotional expression in gender relations.

Maya Hamada's chapter likewise reminds us of the diverse women's spaces by looking at Wang Anyi (王安憶)'s 弟兄們 (*di xiong men*, 'Brothers') to demonstrate the lives of female students and how they accommodate themselves to the authentic gender discourse. For Hamada, the novella is a rare case in contemporary China as the text suggests that there could be love – the word occupied by heterosexual couples for such a long time – between women even though these women's solidary is often disrupted by the family system in the end. Drawing on the concept of the lesbian continuum put forth by Adrienne Rich, which refers to bonds among women who participate in a society with forced heterosexuality, the author argues that the novel tacitly recognizes the destructive potential of the lesbian continuum.

Using Clockwork Orange 521's (*fatiaocheng* 521, 发条橙521) novel 绯色事 (*fei se shi*, *Pink Affairs*) as an example, Jamie J. Zhao emphasizes the 'perverse lesbianism' by looking at the representation of BDSM, rape and incest in Girls' Love (GL) fan fiction in the 2000s Chinese cyberspace. Zhao offers a critical feminist reading of the text by discussing the sex roles, gendered subjectivities and power dynamics in the narrated unconventional lesbian sexual encounters. While these tropes resist the alleged legitimacy and centrality of heterosexual patterns in mainstream Chinese culture, they have also been negotiating with multivalent constructions of lesbianism, including heteropatriarchal cultures' reconfigurations of female sex, gender, sexuality, desire and pleasure in Chinese queer cyber literature. Zhao argues that the graphic depictions of women's sexual relationship in GL can be understood as sophisticated writing tactics through which the writer discursively creates, legitimizes and dramatizes lesbian stories against a heteronormative Chinese sociocultural backdrop. Zhao's work suggests that the frequent deployment of these radical sexual tropes and textual strategies of violent and/or forbidden sex in overtly erotic lesbian representations in the fanfics actively contests the mainstream cultural anxieties surrounding the 'authenticity' and 'continuance' of female same-sex desire and sexual pleasure.

In attempting to destabilize gender, sex and sexuality norms, intersectionality is a key analytical device to investigate how queerness is represented in literature of the Sinosphere. How can we account for multiple approaches, identities, languages, geographies and historical periods that are involved in the process? With this, the third section 'Queer Intersectionality' begins with Josh Stenberg's chapter on the anxiety about homosexuality in 1990s Australian Sinophone fiction. Stenberg notes that the 1990s represents a key decade for the reintroduction of homoeroticism in Chinese-language fiction; it sets the stage for the development of more overtly gay and even queer social identities. The encounter with the male gay Other in these stories contains a subtext of exploring the legitimate scope of individual rights – what attitude should be taken to the freedoms afforded to personal sexual agency in Australia is, for these writers, intimately related to the question of how a politically free society could or should function. Stenberg examines three stories from the 1990s: '馬克的故事' (*Make de gushi*, 'The Story of Mark)' by Shi Guoying (施國英), '蘭花手指' (*Lanhua shouzhi*, 'Orchid Fingers') by Shen Zhimin (沈志敏) and '憤怒的水壺' (*Fennu de shuihu*, 'The Angry Kettle') by Ding Xiaoqi (丁小琦). These authors' positions are largely that of a concerned and sympathetic observer, and who represents part of their engagement with the rules of their new society.

In Chapter 8, Rebecca Ehrenwirth looks at queer poet and novelist Mu Cao's novel 棄兒 (*qi er*, translated into English as *In the Face of Death We Are All Equal* by Scott E. Myers).

Mu Cao is known for depicting the queer lives at the bottom of contemporary Chinese society, such as those of queer migrant workers who are doubly marginalized by their socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. Mu Cao uses various narrative voices to present the characters to the reader in order to highlight their tragedies in *Qi'er*. He also shows that if one wants to be accepted by Chinese society, they are expected to hide their true identity and 'pass' as 'normal'. The novel questions what/who is seen and can pass as normal and what/who is not. To unfold the complexities of the story, Ehrenwirth uses close reading of texts and Gérard Genette's narrative theory to discuss selected passages from *Qi'er* with regard to the concept of passing. In doing so, the chapter points to the limits of Genette's theory.

The section then moves on to Sophia Huei-ling Chen's chapter on Chen Xue's 陳雪 2004 novel 橋上的孩子 (*qiao shang de haizi, A Child on the Bridge*) written from the perspective of a queer daughter born into a money-strapped working-class family. While the gender of the daughter is specified, the lovers' genders remain unmarked throughout the novel. The novel subtly suggests the daughter to be of queer sexuality, which in turn undermines the conventions of fiction writing that a character's gender should be unambiguous and essential. The novel also expands into working-class literature, thereby providing an intersection of queer and working-class perspectives. Set in the alleged 'economic boom' era of the 1980s, the story challenges Taiwan's economic miracle discourse. By characterizing the process of upward class mobility as a trauma, the novel suggests the economic miracle was a sham. This chapter, by contextualizing the novel with the authorial commentary on the land rights of Taiwan's indigenous people, argues that *A Child* is a piece of 'queer Marxist' fiction as discussed by Petrus Liu.

Chapter 10 by Carlos Rojas focuses on the queering of animality in Qiu Miaojin's fiction, including 鱷魚手記 (*eyu shouji, Notes of a Crocodile*) and 蒙馬特遺書 (*Mengmate yishu, Last Words from Montmartre*). Rojas notes that both novels revolve around a set of strategic pairings of a queer first-person narrator and a non-human animal (the titular crocodile and bunny, respectively). The non-human animals symbolize a dialectic of life and death, past and future, intimacy and alienation, and public and private domains. The chapter examines the ways non-human animals in Qiu Miaojin's works are used to reflect on a set of queer-related concerns, particularly with respect to a queer dialectic of identity and alterity.

In Chapter 11, Liang Ge looks at the post-apocalyptic sci-fi and male-male romance 小蘑菇 (*Xiaomogu, The Little Mushroom*). This chapter illustrates how *Xiaomogu*, as a queer/wild, functions to offer alternative formulations of epistemology that refuse the orderly impulses of modernity and present radical queer potential. Through textual analysis, Ge suggests that the queer/wild love in *Xiaomogu* is generated in the process of embracing the disorder, embodied and embedded in the material-discursive continuum in the post-Anthropocene where posthumous humans are posthumans infected and transformed by the very mushroom Anzhe. Through discussing the queer/wild alternative future offered by *Xiaomogu*, this chapter sheds light on the radical as well as complex explorations embodied in the heterogenous Chinese *danmei* cultural ecology where various participants work together to interrogate the heteronormative modernist ideologies in the Anthropocene and offer alternative queer/wild futures.

The fourth section 'In Queer Memory' presents one chapter and two conversations. Chapter 12 by How Wee Ng looks at the representation of homosexuality, homophobia and AIDS in queer Chinese-language theatre in Singapore. Ng analyses how homosexuality, AIDS and familial acceptance are represented in three queer Singaporean Chinese plays 异族 (*yizu, Another Tribe,* 1992), 春光暫借 (*chunguang zanjie*, *Borrowed Time*, 1999) and 后代 (*hou dai*, *The Next Generations,* 1992). These plays sympathetically portray gay people and AIDS victims and challenge stereotypes and homophobia extant in popular culture and state-sponsored cultural conservatism. This chapter then sheds light on the close links between local queer cultural production and transnational flows of global queer culture, as well as the crucial role of Chinese theatre in decolonizing and queering Singapore's

bilingual education policy. Ng's analysis further highlights the social and cultural significance of the plays, and in particular, how *The Next Generations* trailblazed a progressive family model of queer kinship ahead of its time.

This section also features two conversations: a short interview by Hongwei Bao with queer Chinese writer Cui Zi'en on Cui's literary career and works, and a conversation between Howard Chiang and Hangping Xu on queer Taiwanese literature. By presenting the two conversations, we hope to provide an insight of queer literary production from a writer's perspective, but also to rethink the mutually constitutive relationship between queer theory and creative practice, and between queer Chinese literature and queer Sinophone literature.

Any attempt to represent the diverse and constantly expanding field of queer literature in the Sinosphere is bound to fall short. The goal of this introduction is to highlight some distinguishing features of queer literature in the Sinosphere to create space for imagining alternative embodiments of genders, desires and sexualities at odds with the normative, the dominant and the hegemonic. The chapters presented in this volume are an elaboration on how such critique can accommodate a greater degree of multiplicity other than a well-bordered system of literary representation of queerness and scholarship on queer literature dominated by Anglophone texts and languages. Drawing on the contributions of this volume, we suggest that scholarship on queer literature in general should include histories and texts of the queer Sinosphere. This edited collection advocates a queer perspective in understanding literature, one that can potentially take the idea of the Sinosphere beyond the confines of Chinese or Sinophone literature to a larger sphere of influence and transcultural exchange in a globalizing world.

To end this introductory chapter, a brief note about the presentation of romanization and Chinese characters in this book: owing to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Sinosphere, we have followed contributing authors' preference in using simplified/traditional characters and pinyin/Wade–Giles romanization as long as their usage is consistent throughout the chapter. Similarly, we have also followed contributors' preference to present the order of their names, and the names of the writers. We hope this editorial decision not only attends to the complex social and cultural contexts of queer literature in the Sinosphere, but also conjures up a sense of queerness in terms of linguistic and cultural politics.

Notes

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2 Mu Cao's books on the publisher's website, such as: *Gudu de bianyuan: mucao duanpian xiaoshuoji*孤獨的邊緣—墓草短篇小說集 [At the Edge of Solitude: A Collection of Mu Cao's Sh Stories] and *Zai dicheng: Mu Cao shixuan* 在底層: 墓草詩選 [On the Underside, Selected Po Mu Cao], accessed 19 September 2023, https://store.showwe.tw/books.aspx?b=140758

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9 Chris Berry, 'What Is Transnational Chinese Cinema Today? Or, Welcome to the Sinosphere *Transnational Screens* 12, no. 3(2021): 183.

10 Studies of queer history, especially in the premodern and early modern periods, include: Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley, CA University of California Press, 1990); Wah-Shan Chou, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Erotic Chinese Societies*; Wenqing Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900–19* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); Howard Chiang, *After Eunuchs: Science. and the Transformation of Sex in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 201

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Part I

TRANS FORMATION

Chapter 1

Becoming Trans and Already Trans: The Temporality of Trans-Femininity in Ming-Qing Chinese Male Homoerotic Literature

Aixia Huang

Introduction

'Trans' as movements,[1] whether transitioning to a different gender unidirectionally or moving indeterminately between genders, all somehow rely on, and take form through the crossing of time, either tangibly or conceptually.[2] Thinking about 'trans' and time together, especially when doing so beyond identitarian and (trans)normative frameworks, pushes us to think more closely yet fluidly about the connections and the various directions of flow between different temporal locations – past, present and future – and about which of these temporal locations tends to be assigned as the starting point, end point or transitioning point and to be gendered accordingly. It also invites us to explore and recognize more complex and multiple forms of trans temporalities beyond the 'classic', transnormative one that follows a linear progression/transition trajectory from the wrongly gendered past into the new/aspired gender in the future.[3] Following this train of thought, this chapter explores the temporality of trans-femininity in Ming-Qing China.[4] To define the term 'trans-femininity' for this chapter, I follow the emerging post-identitarian thinking in transgender studies and related works, to consider 'trans' as the movement and process of crossing normative gender boundaries across different temporal locations in various directions, in order to achieve or embody 'femininity', or related female roles or expressions in the context of the Ming-Qing gender system. This post-identitarian emphasis becomes even more salient if we consider transness in a temporal and chronological sense, as the individuals who embody trans-femininity in this chapter did not share a unified, stable (trans)gender identity. Some of them managed to pass and live as women, some only lived as women temporarily or performed trans-femininity situationally. Some did not even go through any recognized form of bodily or social gender transformation/realignment in the narrative present, as their gender transformation was considered to have already taken place in the past. In this way, this chapter showcases and expands on what Howard Chiang terms 'different scales of gender transgression', unrecognizable 'through the Western notion of transgender',[5] by showcasing this multiplicity on a temporal level.

More specifically, the chapter traces the temporality of trans-femininity in a particular type of sources from Ming-Qing China – male homoerotic literature. As Wu Cuncun and Giovanni Vitiello observe, Ming-Qing China witnessed a widespread literary interest in documenting and representing male same-sex relationships. This large body of literature that dealt with the male homoerotic theme included work across different genres, ranging from fictional sources such as *xiaoshuo* 小说 (novels), tales and dramas,[6] as well as *biji* 笔记 (miscellaneous notes) and essay collections by literati.[7] However, it is worth stressing that trans-femininity that took form within, or in relation to, same-sex relationships was only one of the *many* historical lineages of trans-femininity in China, as numerous Ming-Qing sources documented and depicted individuals developing and embodying trans-femininity for religious, financial and non-sexual reasons, without necessarily being involved in a same-

sex relationship.[8] Even when in a same-sex relationship, many of the characters examined in this chapter seem to develop trans-femininity for more practical concerns, for example, to improve their own living conditions, rather than necessarily being motivated by sexual or romantic motivations directly related to their intimate male partners. These complex and multiple trans rationales and manifestations reflect the 'desire and motivational complexity' that Sandy Stone encourages us to explore in her field-shaping text for transgender studies.[9] Nevertheless, tracing trans-femininity in Ming-Qing homoerotic sources is of great importance, as this trans lineage can be easily overshadowed by certain homonormative approaches to the history of non-normative gender and sexuality. Homonormativity, especially in relation to transgender history, is discussed by Susan Stryker and others as centring normative sexual orientation categories such as 'homosexuality' and same-sex relations as the dominant framework for historicizing gender and sexual variance.[10] Potentially also due to historical catachresis, given the relatively recent history of trans scholarship, similar emphases on 'homosexuality' seemed to exist in earlier works on Ming-Qing history.[11] Potential trans subjectivities, embodiments and temporalities have been frequently analysed through, or in relation to, the recurring male same-sex relationship framework for researching and interpreting gender and sexual variance.[12] In response to this, a growing number of scholars have raised concerns about the usefulness of the term 'homosexuality' and its potential erasure of transness in the Chinese context. For example, historians of Ming-Qing China like Matthew H. Sommer and Wu Cuncun warn us about the 'anachronism' of assuming the fundamental identity or sexual orientation 'homosexuality' simply based on the assigned sex of a person's object of desire, without taking into consideration of the specificity of Ming-Qing gendered hierarchies and related social and cultural sensibilities.[13] Similarly, scholars working on later periods have also noted 'the conceptual slipperiness between queer and trans' in the larger Sinophone sphere across the twentieth century,[14]as well as how 'transgender and gay/lesbian interpretations can often be at odds' when looking at contemporary cultural productions.[15] Following these reflections and critiques, this chapter attempts to offer a trans re-reading of several 'classic' works of Ming-Qing male homoerotic literature that have been frequently used to historicize male homosexuality. By re-centring the temporal development of trans-femininity in these works, this trans re-reading demonstrates how the temporal development of trans-femininity is essential to or, in some cases, should even be read as the main storyline of these works. In other words, I suggest that some of these homoerotic stories could also be read as trans-erotic literature. Nevertheless, a trans re-reading of homoerotic literature does not mean completely replacing queer readings or trying to clearly re/categorize these characters into trans, gay or other identitarian pasts. Instead, I follow the 'additive' approach of trans studies proposed by Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall 'to expand upon the possibilities that these readings offer'.[16]

To foreground the temporal development of trans-femininity in homoerotic literature, I will specifically analyse the recurring scenes of gender-crossing of the male-assigned protagonist in these works, and pay special attention to the underlying and interwoven construction of time or temporal orders – that is, how the crossing of gender takes place through the arrangement or reordering of different temporal locations across the narrative past, narrative present and narrative future, and what role or which temporal location same-sex romance is assigned to vis-à-vis gender-crossing. In this light, I argue that the temporal construction of trans-femininity tends to go in two directions to develop the romance storyline or help the protagonist to rationalize or legitimize their intimacy with men. On one hand, it follows a forward temporal construction of the protagonist 'becoming trans', as entering a same-sex relationship in the narrative present allows the protagonist to further develop trans-femininity or actualize male-to-female gender-crossing, which also serves as the hallmark of, or ensures the continuation of, their union in the future. With this forward temporal construction of trans-femininity, the *same-sex relationship* is also redefined and turned into a *heterogender relationship*, as the female-male gendered

dynamic has been affirmed within the same-sex relationship with one of the partners 'becoming trans'. On the other hand, the temporal construction also traces backward in time to reveal the protagonist in a same-sex relationship as 'already trans', as gender-crossing had already taken place or was predestined in an anterior temporal location in the narrative past, such as in the previous life or childhood, even for those who maintain male identity without going through any physical or other recognized forms of gender transformation/realignment in the narrative present.

It is also worth clarifying my translation of gender pronouns for the characters in this chapter. The translation of pronouns for gender-crossing or non-conforming individuals remains an equivocal issue in the Anglophone scholarship of Ming-Qing history. This equivocality is partly due to the lack of the gender pronominal split in classical Chinese,[17] and might also be partly due to the lack of a unified and stable (trans)gender identity shared by the individuals moving across different temporal stages in their respective processes of embodying and developing trans-femininity, as examined in this chapter. Some scholars have used combinations of both masculine and feminine pronouns, such as she/he,[18] or only he or she based on the sex assigned at birth,[19] or switch between the masculine and feminine pronouns.[20] In my previous work on Ming-Qing trans history, I have proposed to use gender-neutral pronouns 'they/them' to avoid imposing gendered pronouns that might not reflect one's subjectivity or reproducing the historical violation of their chosen gender that some might have experienced through being documented in historical sources.[21] The usage of 'they/them' is also seen in Matthew Sommer's latest book on Ming-Qing trans history.[22] For this chapter, I decide to continue using gender-neutral pronouns 'they/them' to avoid creating what Jen Manion mentions as 'a false sense of stability' when writing about figures marked by varied gender expressions over a long period of time,[23] and hope to highlight the moving nature of one's gendered positions, since many of the examined characters cross gender boundaries at different levels and in various directions. Instead of claiming this as the most suitable translation for gender-crossing and gender non-conforming characters in Ming-Qing literature, I hope my choice of translation can serve as an invite to scholars, from both Sinophone studies and transgender studies, to further engage with related issues such as monolingualism and (un)translatability in future translational, translingual and transdisciplinary works 'across sex/gender divides and communities'.[24]

Becoming trans

A forward temporal construction of trans-femininity tends to ensure the development of the storyline in male homoerotic literature in two ways. Firstly, entering a same-sex romance provides the conditions of possibility, both conceptual and material, that enable the protagonist to develop or further actualize trans-femininity. Meanwhile, the intimate relationship also relies on the process of the protagonist becoming trans, as gender-crossing tends to mark the temporal register of the pronouncement, or represent the hallmark of the relationship, helping to cement or ensure the continuation of their union.

Same-sex relationships as the conditions of possibility for trans-femininity

The forward temporal logic of entering a same-sex relationship to further develop and actualize one's trans-femininity was embodied by the protagonist Chen Zigao in the late Ming *zaju* drama *Nan Wanghou* 男王后 (The Male Queen).[25] At the beginning of the play, before Zigao met King Lingchuan and managed to transition to become his queen consort, the impoverished Zigao explicitly expressed their anguish about being born as a male and their envisioning of themself as a woman:

> Although my body is that of a man, I look just like a woman … Yesterday, a physiognomer said that I have the face of a dragon and the neck of a phoenix, I am a woman, who is destined to be with a King. Alas! If my parents had had me born as a daughter, with my talent and look, not only would I '[be the] beauty who is not willing to yield to any others,' but I could also be 'so foxy to even bewitch the Emperor'. Even if he was a strong iron man, I could still turn half of him soft and weak. What a shame that I was born a man by mistake![26]

Such (trans-feminine) envisioning, through which Zigao imagined themself as a 'woman', occurred specifically within, and was rationalized through, the conceptual framework of an intimate relationship with a man. The trans-feminine self Zigao envisioned would be a foxy, enchanting and even calculating woman like the future Tang Empress Wu Zetian 武则天, as Zigao quoted Tang poet Luo Binwang 骆宾王's depiction of the young Wu Zetian deliberately using her beauty and flattery to outshine other concubines upon entering the Palace and eventually attract the Emperor.[27] Nevertheless, the existence of this 'foxy' beauty Zigao imagined themself to become relied on the men (the Emperor) who they could mesmerize, while their beauty that signified their femininity was also conceptualized and evaluated based on how attractive it would be for potential male lovers. Therefore, same-sex relationships provided the conceptual conditions of possibilities for Zigao to envision and conceptualize their trans-femininity.

Later, Zigao managed to attract the powerful King Lingchuan with their beauty. Zigao seized upon the opportunity to enter an intimate relationship with the King, by proposing the potential development of trans-femininity and gender-crossing, including castrating themself and dressing as a woman for the King:

> You mentioned that I look pretty and feminine just like a maid; I am willing to change the way I dress to follow those court ladies. Once I put on powder and flower accessories, everyone else will be jealous of my beauty. The one thing lacking would be a pair of arched feet. But once I have a long dress on, who would tell the real from the fake.[28]

The forward temporal logic of trans-femininity was deployed by Zigao again, but this time it was tailored more specifically in relation to King Lingchuan. This trans-feminine future proposed by Zigao depended on the potential to enter an intimate relationship with the King in the narrative present. And King Lingchuan soon provided the material conditions for this gender-crossing, as he brought Zigao back to the palace and made Zigao his queen consort. Zigao finally went through bodily transformation with the help of maids and became the foxy queen consort they had always dreamed of.[29]

Although same-sex relationships provide the condition for Zigao to actualize gender-crossing, Zigao's rationalization behind gender-crossing and same-sex intimacy clearly reflects 'motivational complexity' and individual agency that was not necessarily or completely romantically or sexually driven. Coming from an impoverished background of exile, and having lost all their family, Zigao aspired to develop trans-femininity through entering a same-sex relationship for overtly practical and economic reasons. For Zigao, their trans-feminine appeal to powerful men served as a tool for social advancement. This is obvious in Zigao's visions of their future trans-feminine self, as the ideal man attracted by their trans-femininity would not be any ordinary peasant, but a powerful man like the King. Having secured the title of Queen Consort from King Lingchuan, Zigao proudly declared that they were even more superior to any historical predecessor, including the Han Emperor Ai's male-favour Dong Xian and the Tang concubine Yang Guifei.[30] Both were known for their relationships with emperors, which again showcases how Zigao still conceptually and materially evaluated their success and trans-femininity within the framework of an intimate relationship with a man. Such trans-feminine agency of male-assigned individuals of lower-

class backgrounds entering intimate relationships with powerful men for upward social mobility was widely documented in contemporaneous Ming sources.[31] As Sophie Volpp considers, this scene from *nan wanghou* might even reveal the widespread moralist fear that actors and other lower-class male-assigned individuals would deploy their 'feminine wiles with the officials and … take advantage of these liaisons …, [and] ultimately assume a masculine and empowered positions'.[32]

Apart from being driven by personal, practical reasons as seen in Zigao's story, developing trans-femininity for the male partner due to emotional and romantic bonds remained a major theme in Ming-Qing homoerotic literature. One prominent example is the character Li Youxian from the story *qing qi ji* 情奇纪 (Story of Extraordinary Love) by the late Ming author Zuixihu xinyue zhuren 醉西湖心月主人 (Master of Moon-heart from Drunken West Lake).[33] This story is part of the late Ming homoerotic story collection *Bian'er chai* 弁而钗 (Caps and Hairpins), which includes three other stories depicting male same-sex romance. Nevertheless, the title of the collection Caps and Hairpins (two stereotypically gendered accessories), as Giovanni Vitiello suggests, 'proposes gender hybridism as an ideal'.[34] And this gender hybridism, I suggest, is also sustained through the gender-crossing of one of the lovers within a same-sex relationship.

The forward temporal development of becoming trans through entering a same-sex relationship is deployed in *Qing qi ji* 情奇纪 (The Wonder of qing), especially in Chapter 3 任义侠济困扶危 感恩情男扮女妆 (A Righteous Chivalry Rescues the One Trapped in Danger, The Rescued Male Dresses as a Woman to Repay the Kindness).[35] Previously, the protagonist Li Youxian was trapped in a male brothel, where they met an official Kuang Renlong. Renlong became besotted with Li and bought Li out of the brothel. In order to repay Renlong, Youxian decided to stay with Renlong and serve him in his household. Again, it is upon entering this intimate and exclusive relationship that led to the actualization of Youxian's gender-crossing, as Renlong suggested that Youxian should 'change the look and become a woman', so that he could marry Youxian as a female concubine and take them into his household.[36] Apart from providing the conceptual framework which assigns Youxian with new female family and social roles, Renlong also played an active role as the main facilitator providing the resources and other material conditions to ensure the gender-crossing process was smoothly materialized. For example, in response to Renlong's suggestion, Youxian was concerned about how possible it would be to pass as a female concubine on the corporeal front. Renlong immediately assured Youxian and provided the solution: 'This is not hard at all, as long as you want to, I can go to Liu He's (pharmacy) to buy two sets of bone-softening medicines. After a few washes, your feet will shrink within a month. … The ears will only cost two coins to buy a pair of ear-piercing pliers. In seven days, the holes will open.'[37] With Renlong's help, within one month, Youxian became 'ten times more beautiful than women',[38] and managed to marry Renlong and move into his household without his family members realizing their male past: 'everyone else was deeply happy for Renlong who has had a *neizhu* 内助 [a term used to refer to a capable and virtuous female spouse].'[39] Following this forward temporal logic of trans-femininity achieved through same-sex relationships, Youxian's marriage to Renlong, just like Chen Zigao's relationship with King Lingchuan, actualized their gender-crossing and helped Youxian to further develop trans-femininity, conceptually and materially.

Trans-femininity ensures the continuation of the same-sex union

Apart from providing the conditions of possibility for trans-femininity, same-sex romance also tends to rely on the prospective, forward development of trans-femininity, as the gender-crossing of the protagonist frequently serves as the temporal register that cements their reunion or ensures the continuation of this relationship going forward.

Early Qing playwright Li Yu 李渔 deploys this forward temporal development of trans-femininity in *Nan mengmu jiaohe sanqian* 男孟母教合三迁 (A Male Mencius' Mother Educates a Son and Moves House Three Times) to depict how the protagonist You Ruilang goes through male-to-female gender-crossing to save the relationship with their male lover, Xu Jifang.[40] The story was set in late Ming central Min (now Fujian), a region known for the tradition of male same-sex marriage, as documented by contemporary miscellaneous collections and literary writings.[41] Under this tradition, teen You Ruilang married the local literatus Xu Jifang at the age of fourteen. Although teen Ruilang had feminine beauty that was considered more superior and natural than ordinary women, Ruilang's male sex assigned at birth still posed a threat to their marriage. With Ruilang growing older, Jifang started to worry that Ruilang's potentially growing desire for women would arise and cause their separation.[42] At this moment, the further continuation of the same-sex marriage relied on Ruilang's development of trans-femininity and gender-crossing. Worried that Jifang would abandon them after their beauty fades and hoping to showcase their dedication to being with [Jifang] for the rest of the life, Ruilang decided to castrate themself, which serves as the starting point of their gender-crossing and as the further development of trans-femininity. If castration can be seen as transitioning on the sexual front, based on the phallocentric understandings of gender embodiments and sexual acts in Ming-Qing discourse,[43] Ruilang soon moved on to transition on the bodily and social fronts. For instance, Ruilang starts to adopt women's clothes and hairstyle and wear specific footwear to create the illusion of bound feet which, according to Dorothy Ko, were considered as a bodily marker of proper Ming-Qing womanhood.[44] Ruilang even adopted a woman's name, Ruiniang, changing the character lang 郎 (a young man) in the name into niang 娘 (a young woman); and started to perform the domestic role of a *neizhu*, supporting Jifang by doing sewing and embroidery work in the domestic sphere, which was considered as the proper 'womanly work' performed by Ming-Qing women, as suggested by Francesca Bray.[45] With Ruiniang 'becoming trans', the relationship was saved, as 'Jifang now has both a beautiful wife and young son in front of him, it is the perfect time to enjoy happiness'.[46]

Similar to *qing qi ji*, this forward temporal construction of trans-femininity in Li Yu's story not only ensures the continuation of the same-sex relationship, but essentially re-defines it as a heterogender one and reincorporates it within the existing social and moral systems. As the story developed, even after Jifang had passed away, Ruiniang's trans-femininity and womanhood were constantly emphasized to signify their dedication towards Jifang, through dominant Confucian language of women's virtue. Ruiniang is praised for being a chaste widow and virtuous mother as they brought up Jifang's son by themself.[47] Sophie Volpp acutely points out that in this story, the author, Li Yu, 'underscores the enduring yet flexible nature of the terms of Confucian human relations' and how 'those terms can be employed in nonnormative ways'.[48] And to further juxtapose this (trans)gendering power of Confucianism with the passing of time, this 'flexible nature' of Confucian terms is manifested in the crossing and mutuality of gender (of Ruiniang); and the process of the 'nonnormative' employment of these terms lies in the forward development of trans-femininity that cements the marriage, within which these enduring 'terms of Confucian human relations' such as female chastity and loyalty towards a husband take form. Similarly, Laura Wu also notes the recurring emphasis on 'the institutions of heterosexual sex and marriage' in Ming-Qing literature on female same-sex relationships, as 'the bond between husband and wife' provides the dominant analogy and context for literary representation of female same-sex relationships.[49]

The use of the forward construction of becoming trans to cement same-sex romantic union can also be seen in the mid-Qing story *Nie Xiaoyu* 聂小玉 by Zen Yandong, written during the Qianlong reign (1735–96).[50] The protagonist Nie Xiaoyu is a celebrated *dan* actor in Beijing known for their feminine beauty that women cannot match. Despite having

attracted numerous powerful male elites, Nie grows particularly close to Zhai Qiushan, a young male student who is yet to pass the civil examination. The social dynamic between this couple differs from those of the previous stories where the trans-feminine character tends to come from relatively poorer living conditions. The humble conditions of Zhai as a poor young student in comparison to Nie's luxurious lifestyle seem to hold Zhai back from further pursuing Nie, despite Nie having made serval offers to support his studies. Nevertheless, the long-awaited romantic union is only cemented through Nie pronouncing trans-femininity, or 'becoming trans', for Zhai. In this scene, Zhai finally agrees to visit Nie in their grand residence where the two express their admiration towards each other. Nie then presents their womanly side to Zhai to seal this relationship:

> Nie returns and changes into nightwear, looking just like a woman. [Nie then] sleeps together with Zhai, Zhai gently cuddles [Nie] as if holding the most precious treasure. Nie's beautiful look and seducing manners, as well as smooth and glowing skin are way more superior to those produced by ordinary makeup, clothes and hairpins.[51]

Having cemented and pronounced their intimate bond, Nie's trans-femininity also ensures the further development of this relationship, as:

> From now on, the two people stay with each other, just like husband and wife. Someone else tries to arrange marriage for Nie. Nie laughed: 'Although I have a male body, in fact, I have a woman's heart. The change of heavenly principles would have already taken place in an unknown time … '[52]

Similar to the 'male Mencius's mother' Ruiniang, Nie highlights their development of trans-femininity to protect the relationship with Zhai they had cemented and refuses the possibility of being with other women. Later, under the care and support of Nie, Zhai successfully passed the civil examination as the top candidate.[53] This storyline resembles the well-celebrated intimate relationship between contemporary Mid-Qing literatus Bi Yuan 毕沅 and the famous actor Li Guiguan 李桂官, who was widely praised as *Zhuangyuan furen* 状元夫人 (The Top Candidate's Wife) for carefully looking after and supporting Bi till he passed the imperial civil exam as the Top Candidate and became a powerful official.[54] Nevertheless, when explaining their gender-crossing, Nie also implied another form of temporal logic that differs from the single, forward motion of 'becoming trans', as Nie suggests their interior trans-femininity might have already taken shape in an anterior temporal location.[55] This backward temporal logic of tracing trans-femininity will be further examined in the following section.

Already trans

Through tracing backward in time, Ming-Qing homoerotic literature also tends to deploy a retrospective, backward temporal construction to reveal that one of the partners in the same-sex romance as 'already trans', since the gender-crossing of this individual has already taken place or has been pre-destined in an earlier temporal location, which can be at a younger age or in the previous life. Like the 'becoming trans' temporal development, this backward temporal tracing also helps individuals to legitimize or make sense of their intimate bonds with another male-assigned individual within the orthodox heterogender language and related moral system.

This backward temporal construction could be seen in the late eighteenth-century story collection *Mindu bieji* 闽都别记 (Supplementary record of the capital of Min) by Liren heqiu 里人何求 (Villager Who Asks for Nothing).[56] This collection includes a story depicting the romance between two male merchants Zhang Yin and Liang Yun, who were born at the

same time and grew up together. The bond between them was so strong that both Zhang and Liang ignored the marriages their parents had separately arranged for them and continued to live together. To explain the cause of the confusingly strong bond between these two men, the author traces backward in time to reveal that Liang had been a woman in the previous life:

> Zhang Yin in the previous life had been the son of the Ai family within the city and was named Jinglang. Liang Yun had been the daughter of the Leng family in Jianpu, named Shuangchan. These two had fallen in love with each other and hence got engaged. When the wedding was about to take place, suddenly the former emperor chose Shuangchan to enter the court as a consort. [Shuangchan] had refused. Her husband Jinglang had then also been taken, together [they] had been burned to death. Their spirits had survived and reunited as one, then flew to Wuyu and reincarnated separately into Zhang's and Liang's households. They were both reborn as males. Once they grew up, they became friends immediately, eating and sleeping together, and cannot be separated, just to make up for past sorrow and regrets.[57]

The temporal span is extended in the story, as one's previous and current life are seen as one continuous trajectory, through which gender-crossing can take place during reincarnation. Liang's trans-femininity had emerged through the gender-crossing during reincarnation, and remained internal to their current life, which led to Liang's (re)union with Zhang. In this way, the male-male romance between Zhang and Liang, which had caused controversy and puzzlement among their family members, was now reinterpreted and made intelligible as normative heterogender romance/marriage, as Liang had always been a 'woman', but was born in the wrong body. Moreover, it was the unfinished love between a man and woman, more specifically in this case, between a husband and wife from the earlier temporal location, that ensured these two 'males' were reunited, despite the crossing of two lifetimes and of genders, as well as all the controversy they aroused as a same-sex couple in the current life.

Similar backward temporal construction revealing gender-crossing as already taken place or as pre-destined is also used to depict the previously examined character Li Youxian from *qing qi ji*. The author first hinted at this backward temporal logic in the title of the first chapter *xian Beijing qianshi yin luo nanyuan, luo nanyuan qian niezhai* 陷北京前世因 落南院冤孽债 (Trapped in Beijing due to Destiny from the Previous Life, Fallen in the Male Brothel due to Karmic Debts),[58] only fully revealing it in the final chapter. Having married as Kuang's female concubine and looked Kuang's son by themself, Li Youxian decided to leave the Kuang family for a pilgrimage to the south, in order to make sense of the sufferings that had led to their gender-crossing. On the journey, Li met a Daoist boy fairy, who revealed that Youxian was the reincarnation of the Daoist spiritual master Yuhua Zhenren, and the gender-crossing had been pre-destined as part of the tests Yuhua Zhenren had to go through to reach sacredness. In Youxian's previous life:

> When visiting Penglai Island, [Yuhua Zhenren] met the female immortal Danruo and started to discuss issues between men and women in the human world. He then had an idea: 'I would have to become as a woman for once, to live the experience and see what that is like by myself. Then it would not be too late for me to achieve the final sacredness.[59]

Upon reaching the human world, Yuhua Zhenren suddenly worried that: 'being born into a female body would have many inconveniences'.[60] So, at the last minute, they decided to reincarnate as a male (Li Youxian). Nevertheless, guided by the pre-destined test of experiencing living as a woman, Li Youxian ended up in a male brothel, where they met Kuang. Being with Kuang allowed Youxian to finally fulfil this pre-destined task as '[Youxian] then changed into women's clothes, and became someone's concubine. All aspects of a

woman's life, including troubles and sadness, had all been experienced.'[61] In re-emphasizing how Kuang provided the material conditions that allowed Youxian to complete the gender-crossing test, the author not only rehearses the forward temporal logic of 'becoming trans' but also skillfully renders it as part of the 'already trans' temporal construction. Following this timeline, a coherent main trans-feminine storyline is finally revealed and foregrounded. In this light, I propose that *qing qi ji* could probably be read as a trans story, with the main storyline evolving around a male deity crossing gender to achieve sacredness. Male same-sex relationships, rather than being the key focus of the story, only serve as one of the many plot twists, including Youxian being trapped in the male brothel and looking after Kuang's son, to help to develop this main trans storyline of gender-crossing. Temporally speaking, the same-sex romance between Li Youxian and Kuang Renlong only occupies a short temporary phase, which is then re-defined and re-diverted into part of the larger 'already trans' temporal narrative, together revealing and assisting Youxian's pre-destined 'trans pilgrimage'.

This backward temporal logic of tracing trans-femininity to explain one's intimate relations with males was so popular that it seemed to have travelled outside of literature and was adopted by the mid-Qing actor Fang Junguan 方俊官 from the Qianlong reign (1735–96). Fang Junguan was widely known as a *zhuangyuan furen* (The Top Candidate's Wife) due to Fang's intimate relationships with literati, including Zhuang Peiyin 庄培因.[62] As documented by contemporary literatus Ji Yun 纪昀 in *Yuewei caotang biji* 阅微草堂笔记 (Jottings from the grass hut for examining minutiae), Fang Junguan first recalled a dream of gender-crossing and located it in an anterior temporal location from their childhood:

> Junguan said they initially were a young student of Confucianism; at the age of thirteen to fourteen, [they] were studying in the county school …. Suddenly [Junguan] was in a dream where there were instruments playing and wedding candles lit. [Junguan] was taken into a woman's inner room. Looking at himself, [Junguan] was wearing a long-embroidered dress, with jewels and accessories on the head. Looking down at the feet, [Junguan] saw two tiny bound feet. [Junguan] looked just like a bride. Feeling confused and clueless, [Junguan] was then forcibly taken by a group of people into a tent, sat alongside a man. Scared and ashamed, [Junguan] became all sweaty and then woke up.[63]

Then, Fang Junguan made a temporal connection between this scene of gender-crossing from the past and their current occupation as a well-known cross-dressing *dan* actor who relied on the patronage of powerful men: 'Later in life, [Fang] was seduced by rogues and lost himself in the theatre and entertainment world. [Fang] finally realised that everything had been predestined.'[64] This backward temporal logic was echoed by contemporary commentators, as Ji Yun included their friend's Ni Yujiang 倪余疆 's comment: 'What is already in your mind, becomes what is in the dream',[65] suggesting that Fang's childhood dream of gender-crossing was a sign that trans-femininity had already taken shape. As a believer of *sanshenglun* 三生论 (The Theory of Three Lives) himself, Ji Yun ended this piece by attributing Fang Junguan's current situation to the previous life – an even earlier temporal location than childhood – when gender-crossing had been decided.[66]

If we take Fang Junguan's occupation into consideration, this 'already trans' temporal logic might have also been deployed by Fang deliberately as a self-fashioning strategy to boost their public profile and career. The feminine appeal and the aura around gender-crossing were essential to successful *dan* actors like Fang Junguan, as some *dan* actors tended to not only cross-dress to perform female roles on the stage, but to also provide entertaining and sometimes sexual services to male patrons off stage.[67] These *dan* actors who maintained intimate relations with patrons were also called *xianggu* 像姑 (women look-alikes), which again marked and emphasized their trans-feminine appeal in the eyes of

male patrons and theatre connoisseurs.[68] Thus, Fang might have used this retrospective tracing of trans-femininity in a strategic way, to legitimize and rationalize why they now exceled in the art of female-impersonation as a *dan* actor, embodying the trans-feminine appeal that made them a *zhuangyuan furen* desired by literati.

Concluding remarks

Through recentring and analysing the recurring temporal construction of trans-femininity in Ming-Qing male homoerotic literature, this chapter demonstrates a trans re-reading of these classic literary texts that have been frequently used to historicize male homosexuality. With an emphasis on the protagonist 'becoming trans' or/and being 'already trans' in these texts, the same-sex romance in the narrative present is then re-defined and re-incorporated into a trans storyline that is developed across a longer temporal span. Therefore, some of these homoerotic texts, as I propose, could also be read as trans-erotic literature.

Hopefully, this analysis of the interwoven crossings of time and gender in Ming-Qing homoerotic literature is a starting point for more reflections on, and imagining of, new formations and understandings around (trans)gender and (homo)sexuality in the future. For example, how have these trans temporalities from Ming-Qing China travelled across time, space and genres, and how might they have intertwined with, or influenced, our own dis/identifications with the contemporary LGBTQ+ identities in China or in the larger Sinophone sphere today? Is it possible that some people might still envision entering an intimate male same-sex relationship as a way to explore or actualize their trans-femininity, in a way that embodies the 'becoming trans' temporal logic? Or is it possible that, when someone is trying to make sense of their male same-sex desires/relationships, they might imagine that they could have been a woman in a pervious temporal location, therefore embracing the 'already trans' temporal logic and redefining the gender dynamic within the same-sex relationship? Although such re/imaginations and re/arrangements of gender and sexuality rely on heterogender relationships being the main conceptual framework – one of the key logics that undergirded the construction of trans temporality in these Ming-Qing homoerotic literary works to reiterate the orthodox Confucian moral language – it is still important to explore and consider how different individuals might deploy these trans temporal narratives strategically for their own interests or agendas, or even rearticulate them as a source of (trans)gender and material affirmation within the power structures they were situated. More potential trans subjectivities can be further discovered through exploring the ever-shifting understandings and affect attached to the crossings of gender and time.

Notes

1 For the emerging post-identitarian thinking on seeing 'trans' as movements rather than stable, universal identity, see Hongwei Bao, *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism* (London: Routledge, 2020), 153–4; Helen Hok-Sze Leung, 'Trans on Screen', in *Transgender China*, ed. Howard Chiang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 185; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2.

2 On the relationships between narratives of transition, time and temporality, see Atalia Israeli-Nevo, 'Taking (My) Time: Temporality in Transition, Queer Delays and Being (in the) Present', *Somatechnics* 7, no. 1 (March 2017): 34–49; Kadji Amin, 'Temporality', *TSQ* 1, no. 1–2 (May 2014): 219–22.

3 C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, 'Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on

Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife', in *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 67; Israeli-Nevo, 35; Fernanda Carvajal, 'Image Politics and Disturbing Temporalities: On "Sex Change" Operations in the Early Chilean Dictatorship', *TSQ* 5, no. 4 (November 2018): 621–37.

4 The Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1911) were the last two imperial dynasties in Chinese history, before the first Republic of China was established.

5 Howard Chiang, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 3–6.

6 These fictional works included the late Ming story collection *Bian'er chai* (Caps and Hairpins) by Zuixihu xinyue zhuren 醉西湖心月主人 (Master of Moon-heart from Drunken West Lake), the late Ming drama *Nan wanghou* 男王后 (The Male Queen) by Wang Jide 王骥德 and the Qing Chen Sen 陈森's *Pinhua baojian* 品花宝鉴 (The Precious Mirror of Ranking Flowers). For more discussion on Ming-Qing fictional works on male same-sex relationships, see Giovanni Vitiello, 'The Dragon's Whim: Ming and Qing Homoerotic Tales from "The Cut Sleeve"', *T'oung Pao* 78, no. 4/5 (1992): 341–72; Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

7 These *biji* collections included Shen Defu's *Wanli yehuobian* 万历野获编 (Miscellaneous Notes from the Wanli Reign), Xie Zhaozhe 谢肇淛's *Wu zazu* 五杂俎 (Five Miscellanies) from the late Ming; Ji Yun 纪昀's *Yuewei caotangbiji* 阅微草堂笔记 (Jottings from the Yuewei Grass Hut) from the Qing. For more on *biji* and Ming-Qing literati writings on male same-sex relationships, see Wu Cuncun, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 12–13; Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson, *Homoeroticism in Imperial China: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 241–64.

8 Yuan Mei 袁枚, *Dian miangu xiucai banshi nüzhuang* 滇绵谷秀才半世女妆 (Scholar Dian Miangu Living as a Woman for Half the Life) in *Zi bu yu* 子不语 (What the Master Would Not Discuss) (Beijing: Zhongguo guoji gaungbo chubanshe, 1992), 59; Xuan Ding 宣鼎, *Xiang Han'er* 香憨儿, in *Yeyu qiudenglu* 夜雨秋灯录 (Notes Made on Rainy Nights Under An Autumn Lamp) (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 1987), vol. 2, 210–16.

9 Sandy Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', *Camera Obscura* 10, no. 2 (29) (May 1992): 166.

10 Susan Stryker, 'Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity', *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 145–57. Also see M. W. Bychowski, Howard Chiang, Jack Halberstam, Jacob Lau, Kathleen P. Long, Marcia Ochoa, C. Riley Snorton, Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici, 'Trans*historicities': A Roundtable Discussion', *TSQ* 5, no. 4 (November 2018): 658–85, (675). For more discussions on queer and trans reading of gender variant figures, different emphases and overlapping genealogies of trans-femininity and homosexuality, see M. W. Bychowski, 'The Transgender Turn: Eleanor Rykener Speaks Back', in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Kłosowska (New York: Cornell University Press, 2021), 95–113; Jules Gill-Peterson, 'The Trans Woman of Color's History of Sexuality', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 32, no. 1 (January 2023): 96–7.

11 As Wenjuan Xie points out, 'the study of Chinese transgender has seldom been conducted in the name of transgender.' For instance, Xiaomingxiong's 1984 monograph *Zhongguo tongxing'ai shilu* (The History of Homosexuality in China) includes two trans-related chapters: *yizhuang zhe* 異裝者 (Transvestitism) and *bianxing zhe* 變性者 (Transsexuals), which essentially approached and understood 'the transvestite' and 'the transsexual' as sub-genres or variants of the Chinese 'homosexual' traditions. See Wenjuan Xie, '(Trans)Culturally Transgendered: Reading Transgender Narratives in (Late) Imperial China' (PhD thesis. University of Alberta, 2015), 7.

12 Wu Cuncun notes the growing attention to male homosexuality in imperial China,

starting from the 1990s, stimulated by developments in gay and lesbian studies, a response to 'Foucauldian methods in history', and a series of Anglophone works starting from Bret *Hinsch's Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Within this body of work, the cross-dressing and sometimes cross-gender phenomenon, especially among Ming-Qing male-assigned entertainers, has been repeatedly used to historicize male homosexuality. For example, Bret Hinsch uses the seventeenth-century author Li Yu's and other contemporary authors' works that depicted gender-crossing individuals to provide 'glimpses of homosexual life' and to recover a 'homosexual tradition' in *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, 120–35.It is also important to acknowledge that scholarly attention has been predominantly paid to male same-sex activities, whereas female non-normative sexual experiences and formations have received less attention. See Laura Wu, 'Through the Prism of Male Writing: Representation of Lesbian Love in Ming-Qing Literature', *Nan Nü* 4, no. 1 (2002): 1–34.

13 On more discussions about the usefulness of the term 'homosexuality' in Ming-Qing China, see Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 116–17; Matthew H. Sommer, 'Was China Part of a Global Eighteenth-Century Homosexuality?', *Historical Reflections/ Réflexions Historiques* 33, no. 1 (2007): 117–33; Matthew H. Sommer, *The Fox Spirit, the Stone Maiden, and Other Transgender Histories from Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024); Wu Cuncun, *Homoerotic Sensibilities,* 5–11; Vitiello*, The Libertine's Friend,* 13–14.

14 Chiang, *Transtopia*, 210.

15 Leung, 'Trans on Screen', 184.

16 Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall, 'Introduction', in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 14.

17 There was no third person feminine pronoun in Chinese as a translational equivalent for 'she' until 1917 – see Coraline Jortay, 'War of Words and Gender: Pronominal Feuds of the Republican Period and the Early PRC', in *Cultural China 2020: The Contemporary China Centre Review*, ed. Séagh Kehoe, Gerda Wielander (London: University of Westminster Press, 2021), 123–4.

18 For example, Charlotte Furth uses she/he to refer to the sex-changing Li Liangyu and cross-dressing predator Sang Chong in 'Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century China', *Late Imperial China* 9, no. 2 (December 1988): 10, 22.

19 Sophie Volpp, 'The Discourse on Male Marriage: Li Yu's A Male Mencius's Mother', *positions* 2, no. 1 (February 1994): 113–31.

20 Olivia Milburn, 'Bodily Transformations: Responses to Intersex Individuals in Early and Imperial China', *NAN NÜ* 16, no. 1 (2014): 1–28.

21 Aixia Huang, 'Trans-gender Things: Objects and the Materiality of Trans-femininity in Ming-Qing China', *Gender & History* 36, no. 1 (2024): 52–71.

22 Sommer, *The Fox Spirit, the Stone Maiden, and Other Transgender Histories from Late Imperial China*.

23 Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 13–14.

24 For more discussions on translation and transgender, see Yahia Zhengtang Ma, 'Queering Transgender and Translation', *TSQ* 9, no. 2 (May 2022): 304–7; A. Finn Enke, 'Translation', *TSQ* 1, no. 1–2 (May 2014): 241–4; David Gramling and Aniruddha Dutta, 'Introduction', *TSQ* 3, no. 3–4 (November 2016): 333–56; Douglas Robinson, *Transgender, Translation, Translingual Address* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

25 Wang Jide 王骥德, *Nan wanghou* 男王后 (A Male Queen), in *Quan Ming zaju* 全明杂剧 (Collections of Ming zaju), ed. Chen Wannai (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1979), 6: 3161–3222. All translations are mine, unless noted otherwise.

26 [俺家身虽男子,貌似妇人 … 昨日有个相士,说我龙颜凤颈,是个女人,定配君王。嗳!当初爷娘若生我做个女儿,凭著我几分才色,说什么 '蛾眉不肯让人',也做得 '狐媚偏能惑主'。饶他是铁汉,也教软瘫他半边哩!可惜错做个男儿也呵!] from Wang Jide, 3166–3167.

27 [入门见嫉,蛾眉不肯让人;掩袖工谗,狐媚偏能惑主 …] (Entering the palace and she feels jealous; being a beauty she is unwilling to yield to any others. Always whispering and being skilled at flattery, she is so foxy to even bewitch the Emperor.' from Luo Binwang 骆宾王, *Wei Xujingye tao Wu Zhao jiao*为徐敬业讨武曌檄 (A Call to Eradicate Wu Zhao For Xu Jingye), see Sophie Volpp, *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 138.

28 [你道我俏娉婷似女侍家,我情愿改梳妆学内宫罢。看略施朱粉上桃花,管教人风韵煞。只双弯一搦较争差,但系长裙、辨那些儿真假。] from Wang Jide, 3174.

29 Ibid., 3181–4.

30 Wang Jide, 3183; Volpp, *Worldly Stage*, 155.

31 Shen Defu 沈德符, *Xiaochang*, in *Wanli yehuo bian* 万历野获编 (Unofficial Matters from the Wanli Reign) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), 2:621.

32 Volpp, *Worldly Stage*, 138.

33 Zuixihu Xinyue Zhuren醉西湖心月主人, '*Qing qi ji* 情奇纪 (The Wonder of qing)', in *Siwuxie huibao* 思无邪汇宝 (A Deposit of Treasures That Induce Innocent Thoughts), ed. Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui (Taipei: Taiwan daying baike, 1995), 6:269–344.

34 Giovanni Vitiello, 'Exemplary Sodomites: Chivalry and Love in Late Ming Culture', *NAN NÜ* 2, no. 2 (Jan 2000): 207–57.

35 Zuixihu Xinyue Zhuren, 303.

36 [我意欲卿改妆作女,迎娶归彼 …] from Zuixihu Xinyue Zhuren, 309.

37 [这个一发不难,只要你肯,我到刘鹤家(药铺)买两服软骨丸来,连洗数次,不消一月,便小了。耳朵只消两个铜钱,买副耳箝,七日便通窍了。] from Zuixihu Xinyue Zhuren, 310.

38 [比之女子更胜十倍。] from Zuixihu Xinyue Zhuren, 311.

39 [外人深为匡子庆得内助。] from Zuixihu Xinyue Zhuren, 312.

40 Li Yu 李渔, *Nan mengmu jiaohe sanqian* 男孟母教合三迁 (A Male Mencius's Mother Raises Her Son Properly by Moving House Three Times), in *Wu shengxi* 无声戏 (Silent Operas) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1989), 90–111.

41 Shen Defu, *Nanse zhimi* 男色之靡 (The Prevalence of Male Beauty), in *Wanli yehuo bian*, 2:622.

42 Li Yu, *Nan mengmu jiaohe sanqian,* 103–4.

43 Furth, 'Androgynous Males and Deficient Females', 4–6; Sommer, *Sex,* 116–18; Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend*, 32–5.

44 Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1–10, 140.

45 Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 184; 255–60; Francesca Bray, *Technology, Gender and History in Imperial China: Great Transformations Reconsidered* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 117–18.

46 [季芳此时娇妻嫩子都在眼前,正好及时行乐 …] from Li Yu, *Nan mengmu jiaohe sanqian*, 104.

47 Ibid., 111.

48 Volpp, 'The Discourse on Male Marriage', 127–8.

49 Wu, ‘Through the Prism of Male Writing’, 19–34.

50 Zeng Yandong曾衍东, *Nie Xiaoyu* 聂小玉, in *Xiao dou peng* 小豆棚 (Little Bean Arbor) (Shanghai: Dada tushugong yingshe, 1935), 152–3.

51 [聂复晚妆,如妇人,同翟共寝。翟偎抱温柔,如怀至宝。聂之娇容媚态,肌肤滑泽,更非脂粉裙钗所得方其万一。] from Zeng Yandong, 152.

52 [从此二人厮守,如夫如妇。有人为聂言婚,聂笑曰:“我赋男形,实有女心,乾道变化,将不知其已也。] Zeng Yandong, 152.

53 Ibid., 153.

54 Wu Cuncun, *Homoerotic Sensibilities,* 81–7.

55 Zeng, 152.

56 Liren Heqiu 里人何求, *Mindu bieji* 闽都别记 (Supplementary Record of the Capital of Min) (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2012), 1:433–4.

57 [张音乃前世城内艾家子,名敬郎;梁韵乃剑浦冷家女,名霜蝉。两相爱慕,遂结姻,将迎娶合卺,突被前王延翰选霜蝉进宫为妃,不从,又拿其夫敬郎,并入火烧死。两个之精气不散,结作一团,飞至吴屿张、梁两家分股投胎,出世皆男。长来即结作朋友,寝食不离,以了前恨。] from Liren heqiu, 1:439.

58 Zuixihu xinyue zhuren, 271–85.

59 [因游蓬莱岛,遇淡若仙姑,谈及男女世事,他便起了念头,道:『我必要做一番女人,身历其境,看是如何滋味,再来正果未晚。] from Zuixihu xinyue zhuren, 336.

60 『落了女身,有好些不便。] from Zuixihu xinyue zhuren, 336.

61 改了女妆,又为人做了妾。女人滋味,烦恼苦楚,俱已达过。] from Zuixihu xinyue zhuren, 336.

62 Zhao Yi 赵翼, *Liyuan seyi* 梨园色艺 (The Beauty and Talents From the Pear Garden), in *Yanpu zaji* 檐曝杂记 (Jottings rom the Sunny Awning) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 37–8.

63 [俊官自言本儒家子,年十三四时,在乡塾读书,忽梦为笙歌花烛,拥入闺闼,自顾则绣裙锦帔,珠翠满头,俯视双足,亦纤纤作弓弯样,俨然一新妇矣。惊疑错愕,莫知所为,然为众手挟持,不能自主,竟被扶入帏中,与男子并肩坐,且骇且愧,悸汗而寤。] from Ji Yun 纪昀, *Yuewei caotang biji* 阅微草堂笔记 (Jottings from the Grasshut for Examining Minutiae) (Taipei: Xinxing shuju, 1956), 154.

64 [后为狂且所诱,竟失身歌舞之场,乃悟事皆前定也。] from Ji Yun, 154.

65 [汝殆积有是想,乃有是梦。] from Ji Yun, 154.

66 Ibid.

67 Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson, ‘Male Love Lost: The Fate of Male Same-Sex Prostitution in Beijing in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries’, in *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures*, ed. Fran Martin et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 45–6.

68 He Gangde 何刚德, *Chunming menglu* 春明梦录 (Dream Records of the Capital) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1983), 2:53–4.

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Chapter 2

‘An Ideal Woman’: Cross-Dressing and Male Homoerotic Desire in Modern Chinese Literature

Dylan K. Wang

She was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely Apparition, sent
To be a moment’s ornament; …
A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

I saw her upon nearer view,
A Spirit, yet a Woman too! …

William Wordsworth, ‘She Was a Phantom of Delight’[1]

Introduction

This chapter examines two modern Chinese literary works that feature female impersonators, namely Ding Xilin’s one-act play ‘Dear Husband’ (1924) and Ba Jin’s ‘A Second Mother’ (1933). Although both texts have been studied before, their textual histories and creative contexts have not been fully explored, and their shared theme of cross-dressing has been largely sidelined in favour of other issues. Drawing on Marjorie Garber’s formulation of ‘the third space of possibility’, this chapter seeks to explore the meanings of cross-dressing in modern Chinese literature and nation-building.

According to Garber’s ground-breaking study *Vested Interests*, cross-dressing is a universal phenomenon occurring with particular frequency in the performing arts.[2] Charlotte Suthrell expounds this point further: ‘The whole context of theatre and acting acknowledges the production of an illusion, in which clothing plays a crucial part; that the participant is not part of a “real life” situation, thus opening doors which usually remain closed.’[3] This observation is especially relevant in the case of China where the theatrical convention of female impersonation by male actors was already common during the Song dynasty (960–1279) and had been firmly established by the Ming (1368–1644) period.[4]

In *Zhang Xie zhuangyuan* 張協狀元 (Top Graduate Zhang Xie), the earliest extant specimen of *xiwen* 戲文 (dramatic text) and dated sometime between 1234 and 1279,[5] we find the following exchange between a *dan* 旦 (female character), a *jing* 淨 (clown) and a *mo* 末 (male character):

POORLASS: Greetings!
GATEKEEPER JING: Oh, it’s just a fake female.
…
POORLASS: But I am a woman.
GATEKEEPER JING: If you’re a woman, why aren’t your feet bound?
GATEKEEPER MO: You must look up at the top.

GATEKEEPER JING: I've looked up at her face.
GATEKEEPER MO: Like a tame dog.[6]

With a flourish of licensed tomfoolery, the clown provokes laughter by drawing attention to the fact that the female role is actually being played by a man in drag. However, we find a drastically different attitude toward cross-dressing in a different context. A law of the Zhenghe 政和 era (1111–18) of the Song dynasty punished *nanzi wei chang* 男子為娼 (young males who act as prostitutes) with 100 blows of the heavy bamboo and a fine of 50,000 cash.[7] The late Song literatus Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–98) also mentioned the prosecution of cross-dressing male prostitutes for the offence of *bu nan* 不男 (being not male).[8] These young men, 'all heavily powdered and richly bedecked with ornaments, were proficient in needlework and addressed each other with appellations appropriate for women'.[9] Here the practice of cross-dressing is singled out as the most heinous aspect of their offence, potentially more damaging to social mores than prostitution itself.

A comparison of the two cases points to a situational logic in the characterization of male cross-dressing: when safely confined within the invisible walls of the stage, it was not only tolerated, but indulged; but when a female impersonator intrudes into the realm of everyday life, chaos ensues.

During the following Ming and Qing (1636–1912) dynasties, the literati class developed a lasting fascination with female impersonators which manifested in the forms of patronage, intimate friendship, as well as blatant prostitution, and this left a profound influence on literature.[10]

The late 1930s and the early 1940s witnessed a tendency to desexualize the actor-literati relationship, accompanied by a parallel tendency to heterosexualize the image of *dan* actors, largely a result of contemporary intelligentsia's yearning for a strong, virile Chinese figure, as opposed to China's old emaciated, feminine image.[11] The most bellicose among the guardians of the masculinity of the Chinese national character was Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), who relentlessly censured female impersonators and singled out none other than Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), the world-renowned Peking Opera maestro, as a primary target. He found in the Chinese craze for theatrical impersonation a perverted and decadent aesthetic that causes confusion in gender roles and disrupts the normal patterns of desire.[12] In a 1928 essay, he likens *dan* actors to eunuchs, thus hinting at a possible characterization of these effeminate entertainers as a symbol of China's metaphorical castration in a world where only the fittest (read masculine) can survive. For this reason, Lu Xun abhorred Mei Lanfang's frequent appearances in the press as China's most prominent cultural figure, shaking hands with important foreign artists. He ends his lengthy diatribe with this bitter remark: 'The art that is the most noble, most eternal, and most universal in China is the art of men impersonating women.'[13]

However, between the early years of the Republic and the late 1930s was a brief interval when 'sexual anarchy' was allowed to prevail, and issues as sensitive as premarital sex, homosexuality and sadomasochism were subject to public discussion and debate.[14] It was during this intermezzo that the two pieces of literary works discussed below appeared, reinterpreting the stock character of female impersonator in the light of male anxiety over the emergence of the New Woman (*xin nüxing* 新女性) while pushing the former offstage and into real life.

Elaine Showalter in her seminal study *Sexual Anarchy* discusses how the emergence of the New Woman in the West at the turn of the twentieth century threatened male identity and self-esteem, as a result of which men became 'unwilling to link themselves with emancipated women who might have needs and ambitions of their own'.[15] In addition, as pointed out by the pioneering sexologist Edward Carpenter, the Western feminist movement at the turn of the twentieth century seemed to have been 'accompanied by a marked development of the homogenic passion among the female sex'.[16] The

contemporaneous feminist movement in China, starting from the late Qing, demonstrated similar trends: while some women preferred devoted sisterhood and refused to marry men, others went a step further from the archetype of the New Woman towards that of the Modern Girl who manifested either as a self-absorbed woman searching for subjectivity or as a dangerous *femme fatale* devouring the urban male.[17] In any case, the New Man now found the New Woman, whom he had helped to create, either unwilling to marry him or outright unmarriageable.

Now that 'real' women could no longer fulfil their traditional roles, who may be counted on to play 'the ideal woman'?

In 1930 during his North America tour, Mei Lanfang performed a short scene in front of the camera. When the clip was later released, a prelude was added where Soo Yong (Yang Xiu 楊秀, 1903–84), a Chinese American actress who served as Mei's onstage translator on the tour,[18] introduces the great actor in English:

> Mr Mei Lanfang takes the part of woman characters, but he is not a female impersonator according to the Western sense of the word. He does not attempt to imitate the real woman in nature, but through line and movement he tries to create *an ideal woman*.[19]

In a most uncanny way, the theatrical female impersonator as 'the ideal woman' found *her* way into literary imagination and manifested *herself* in fictional and dramatic works. These texts constitute a marginal yet spectacular phenomenon, and represent a largely unchronicled counter-current to the onrushing discourse of the New Woman.[20] The crossdresser is typically portrayed as an intruder, a threat to the normal patterns of gender and desire. It is representation of such intrusions (and attempted intrusions) in modern Chinese literature that forms the subject of the current chapter.

Ding Xilin: 'Dear Husband' (1924)

> 'A woman, yes, a pure woman, an ideal woman.'[21]

In 1924, a Beijing-based amateur playwright published a one-act play titled 'Qin'ai de zhangfu' 親愛的丈夫 (Dear Husband). The plot is simple enough but quite extraordinary: The newly married wife, Mrs Ren, deftly manages household affairs and treats the staff with respect and warmth. But, rather suspiciously, she has slept alone behind locked doors ever since the wedding. On this fateful day, Yuan, a friend of Mr Ren's, pays a visit to the newlyweds during which it is revealed that 'Mrs Ren is performed by Huang Fengqing 黃鳳卿', a famous Peking Opera *dan* actor.[22] It is only towards the end that we are let into this secret and the motive behind her masquerade. Early on, Mr Ren attended a forum in Central Park on the topic 'Should men and women perform together in traditional Chinese opera?'[23] While many thought it more sensible for actors to play male roles and actresses to play female roles, he vehemently defended the necessity of preserving the time-honoured tradition of female impersonation, to the applause and cheers of the crowd. Having witnessed his gallantry and intelligence, she decided to 'marry' him to repay his kindness.

The author Ding Xilin 丁西林 (1893–1974) cut a unique figure on the modern Chinese literary scene as the only playwright who concentrated solely on writing comedy.[24] Returning to China in 1920 after six years in England, where he trained as a scientist, he became a professor of physics at Peking University, the epicentre of the ongoing Literary Revolution. Before long, he was tempted to try his hand at *huaju* 話劇, or 'spoken drama', written in imitation of Western plays in the Ibsenesque tradition and so named because it mostly consists of speaking and acting, thus distinguishable from traditional Chinese

operatic theatre, which combines singing, speaking, acting, dancing and acrobatics.[25] From 1923 to 1939, he published a series of highly successful one-act comedies, and earned himself the sobriquet 'Dumuju shengshou' 獨幕劇聖手 (Master of the One-Act Play).[26]

In 1957, now Deputy Minister of Culture and director of the Beijing Library, Ding thus reflected on these comic sketches: 'My early plays all have a distinct foreign flavour. Perhaps they ought to be broadly regarded as translations.'[27] Modesty aside, this statement indicates the extent of his indebtedness to English literature, which he had read avidly during his sojourn in England. While a biographer lists George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and Henrik Ibsen as major influences in his writing career, critics have also detected affinity with George Meredith, whose notion of 'thoughtful laughter' informed his understanding of comedy.[28]

An important aspect of his English inheritance, as pointed out by Xiaomei Chen, is 'a gender politics that grants female characters more wit and power than their male counterparts', possibly inspired by Shaw and Meredith.[29] Two other plays written around the same time, 'Yizhi mafeng' 一隻馬蜂 (A Wasp, 1923) and 'Yapo' 壓迫 (Oppression, 1925), have long been taken as exemplars of this strategy, but I would argue that he shows greater innovation in 'Dear Husband' by adapting this gender dynamic for a scenario that would have scandalized a *fin-de-siècle* English audience.[30]

Mrs Ren is a truly refined lady. She supervises the staff cleaning the house in the morning, and 'in the afternoon she reads and practices calligraphy'. 'She also does needlework when she has time': 'Look at the curtains in here, and the tablecloth ….'[31] When she sees Liu, the manservant, in grubby clothes, she immediately summons the tailor and has two gowns made for him in one go.[32] But underneath the façade of a well-managed household, we hear uneasy murmurs of lewd gossip:

> LIU. … (Moves closer) I think the mistress is a bit strange.
> YUAN. In what way strange?
> LIU. Please don't tell the master and mistress.
> YUAN. Go ahead.
> LIU. The mistress …
> YUAN. What about your mistress?
> LIU. The amah says …
> YUAN. What does the amah say?
> LIU (lowers his voice, coming closer to YUAN). The master hasn't slept in the mistress's room once since she's been here.
> YUAN. You fool!…
> LIU. The cook says …
> YUAN. What does the cook say?
> LIU (lowers his voice). The cook says our mistress must be a … (Going over to YUAN's side, LIU whispers.)
> YUAN. Rubbish! Get out, you oaf![33]

Only Mr Ren, fully occupied with his writing, remains blissfully ignorant of all the alarming signs until soldiers arrive from 'the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Army' to summon Huang Fengqing to the birthday banquet of General Wang's mother (68). Frightened out of his wits, Mr Ren confronts his wife:

> MR REN (shakes her). Who on earth are you? Who on earth are you?
> MRS REN (coquettishly). Why are nine out of ten men so rude? There you go, trying to bully a woman.
> YUAN. Oh, a woman!
> MRS REN. A woman, yes, a pure woman, an ideal woman.

MR REN. Let me ask you, why did you come here?

MRS REN (indignantly). Why did I come here? As if I've done any harm to you! In the two months I've been here, I've kept your house neat and clean, I've made your life more comfortable, I've kept your hair nicely trimmed, and I've kept your clothes fresh and tidy. Let me ask you, have I ever let you down? You've enjoyed the kind of happiness that even the newly weds have never experienced, not to mention the love of a woman such that most men have never known. If you don't believe me, wait till you've married again, once, twice, ten times, even a hundred times, and then you'll miss your first wife, because although they can flatter you, serve you, obey you, depend on you, fear you, resent you, grieve over you, suffer over you, cry over you, or even sacrifice their lives for you, but they can never love you as I do.[34]

In defence of herself, she enumerates the many wifely duties she has effortlessly fulfilled. More importantly, unlike most traditional women who would unconditionally submit themselves to their husbands ('they can flatter you, serve you, … '), she is able to love him as an intellectual match and inspire him like a muse:

> Your soul has never been more alert, your heart has never been more vibrant, and your senses have never been more sensitive. You've written well over a hundred thousand words in these two months. My hand's gone numb with copying, it's still sore.[35]

In an uncanny way, she combines the best qualities of both the traditional woman and the New Woman, and therefore possesses an ideal femininity. In the final scene, as Mr Ren struggles to part with his 'pure' and 'ideal' wife, he even finds maternal comfort in her embrace: 'Ah, hold me in your arms and let me sleep awhile. I've never slept in a woman's arms before … apart from sleeping in my mother's arms when I was little. … I'll fall asleep within three minutes … I won't know a thing while I'm asleep, just as if I were in my mother's arms.' To this Mrs Ren replies 'My poor child!'[36] Paradoxically, only an 'artificial' woman like her can enact all the different roles expected of the female sex in modern China.[37]

The question remains, how could Mrs Ren, or Huang Fengqing, have concealed her 'true' sex from her 'dear husband' for so long? At the aforementioned forum, Mr Ren delivered a passionate apologia for female impersonation in Peking Opera:

> [T]here is no such thing as male or female in traditional Chinese opera. The only distinction in traditional Chinese opera is between two kinds of monsters – yes, two kinds of monsters – one of which shouts with their mouths wide open, and the other which screams with their lips stretched tight. One kind coils their hair at the nape, and the other kind hangs it under their nose. One kind strides with their toes turned out, and the other kind totters with their toes turned in. Since this is the case, I see no reason why males and females should perform together.[38]

He sees the world of Peking Opera as a self-referential system of symbols, a realm inhabited by artificial beings completely cut off from reality, hence the necessity of leaving it free from external interference. As he spoke, '[s]itting in a corner of the forum was an exceptionally beautiful woman, wearing a hat and dressed in a cheongsam', who 'couldn't help admiring his intelligence'.[39] Little did he know that one such monster who 'totters with its toes turned in' would gain the upper hand over him by crossing over to the mortal realm and challenging the 'sensible' and 'reasonable' distinction between male and female so resolutely upheld by 'real' people. Yuan attributes Mr Ren's gullibility to his poetic personality: 'A poet is someone who can see what other people can't but can't see what other people can … ' As a result, even though he 'has the keys in his pocket', he has failed to penetrate the locked doors and see what lurks behind.[40]

In contrast to their warm reception of Ding's other plays, his contemporaries almost unanimously dismissed 'Dear Husband' as 'too unrealistic': it is 'far too removed from real life' to be taken seriously; it is 'too bizarre', no more than 'a frivolous piece of writing with an idealistic and Platonic vision of spiritual love which is entirely unfounded in reality'; it is a story 'fabricated out of thin air with no practical significance'; it is 'too exaggerated and shows petit bourgeois taste'.[41] More recently, Kong Qingdong 孔慶東 attempted to present 'Dear Husband' in a more favourable light by explaining away its unusual theme as a manifestation of Ding's 'aestheticist leanings': his plots are meticulously designed like 'physics experiments' that disregard all 'random factors', and his characters are 'highly idealized', most of them 'high-level intellectuals' whose 'thoughts are different from those of common Chinese people' and who 'live in an idealized world'.[42] Both opinions evade the issue of cross-dressing *per se*. Interestingly, Ding seems to have pre-empted his critics as early as 1925 in this short preface to his first collection:

> Should a director who loves beauty take a serious interest in staging 'Dear Husband' as an experiment, I firmly believe that the protagonist Mrs Ren should better be played by Huang Fengqing himself. If the director does not know where to find him and is willing to make do, he should invite a woman to take his place.[43]

Does this mean the story was based on real-life events? Could Ding be referring to one of the Peking Opera stars of his day such as Mei Lanfang (another 'ideal woman')? In any case, one thing is clear: in the absence of Huang Fengqing, it takes a 'real' woman to bear even a resemblance to him.

Ba Jin: 'A Second Mother' (1933)

> 'I have completely become a woman. I am but a woman, nothing more than a plaything.'[44]

We now come to Chengdu, the bustling provincial capital of Sichuan. As in other palmy urban areas of late Qing and early Republican China, homosexual behaviour spanned virtually all social strata of Chengdu with varying degrees of involvement. Even though male prostitutes could not have eclipsed their female colleagues in popularity, sexual relations with other men – especially *dan* actors – were undoubtedly a conspicuous alternative for men seeking pleasure.[45]

It was against this backdrop that the young Ba Jin 巴金 (1904–2005) set his 1933 story 'Di'er de muqin' 第二的母親 (A Second Mother). Orphaned at an early age, the prepubescent protagonist/narrator is placed in the custody of a widowed uncle. One night the narrator's uncle takes him to a local Sichuan opera theatre, where he meets a young man clearly affectionate with his guardian. The stranger takes an instant liking to the boy, who responds fondly and sits on his lap for the rest of the show. When it is time to bid farewell, the young man asks the boy: 'You haven't called me anything yet. What do you think you should call me?'[46] As if possessed, the child calls out 'Mother!' twice, tickling his uncle's fancy but bringing the young man to tears.[47] The young man subsequently takes the boy to his home and treats him to snacks while he goes about his own business. Impatient with waiting, the boy barges into the inner quarters:

> No sooner had I entered the room than I was astonished by what I saw: a woman applying powder to her face while looking into the mirror! Yes! A woman! She wore a pink tight-fitting outfit and a coiffure hung behind her neck. The man who had escorted me in was nowhere to be found.[48]

She then tells a story.[49] A sixteen-year-old boy sold himself to an itinerant opera troupe to provide for his destitute mother and younger brother, and, because of his good looks, was forced to train in female roles. 'Heaven knows how many lashes he had sustained before he started to resemble a woman. Every day, he used what a woman would use, wore what a woman would wear and imitated the voice and gait of a woman.'[50] Once debuted, he proved an instant hit, but had to prostitute himself offstage to patrons to maintain his popularity. Some ten years later, having been replaced by newcomers, he was redeemed by an old man. Henceforth he changed many hands before ending up with the boy's uncle. Now it dawns on the boy that the well-groomed woman before him is none other than the actor in the story: 'I have completely become a woman. I am but a woman, nothing more than a plaything.'[51] 'Her story came as a total surprise. Never in my wildest dreams could I have guessed the nature of her relationship to my uncle.'[52] However, rather than being scared or appalled, he embraces his 'second mother' affectionately. This strange trio (boy, uncle and 'mother') subsequently start living together as a sort of prototypical 'queer family' until two years later his uncle dies and he is separated from his new mother.

This tale would have been dismissed by critics as a work of pure fantasy if Ba Jin had not published an autobiography the following year in which he recounted the real-life events that doubtless had inspired it.[53] Born into a sprawling old-fashioned landowning household, which his grandfather ruled with an autocratic hand, yet brought up in the *sturm und drang* of the May Fourth Movement, the teenage Ba Jin grew to resent the lifestyle and values of his family, was drawn to anarchism, and even mastered Esperanto, popular among a small echelon of the young radical elite.[54] One of the vices of his male relatives was dalliances with *dan* actors. While his father 'was always sincere and treated actors as friends', his Third Uncle had 'special dealings' with a *dan* actor of a Sichuan opera troupe named Li Fengqing 李鳳卿[55]:

> Li Fengqing often came to see Third Uncle. He often chatted to me too. He was a very nice person and could write neat and fine characters with a Chinese brush. Though he wore men's clothes, he carried himself and spoke like a woman. Sometimes he had rouge and powder on his hands and face [from his performances].
>
> Once Grandfather and Third Uncle took Li to our sitting room to dress up and have some photos taken. I saw him prepare his hairdo, powder his face and put on high heels [in imitation of a woman with bound feet]. First, he dressed himself up as an ancient woman general holding a spear. Next, he dressed up as a noble lady in a cheongsam. Photos of these two images were later hung up in Third Uncle's room. He even inscribed poems on them.[56]

For their dalliances with the actor, the young Ba Jin 'was not pleased at all with Grandfather and Third Uncle'.[57] Even though the latter two seemed to treat Li with fondness and respect, Li nonetheless led a miserable life. Shortly after the death of Grandfather, Li also passed away, leaving behind a young widow with no money to cover his funeral expenses. To his credit, Third Uncle arranged Li's interment and paid for everything. It was only later that Ba Jin learned about Li Fengqing's life story:

> Li had been born to a well-off family. When he was 13 or 14, he was kidnapped by an enemy of the family. But his family refused to pay the ransom, so he was sexually abused and sold to a local opera troupe to train to become a *dan* actor.[58]

There is no telling what the actor and the young Ba Jin actually 'chatted' about or how close they became, but he clearly compounded Li's life story with the painful experience of losing his own mother when he wrote 'A Second Mother'.[59]

The actor's tragic life and untimely death so embittered Ba Jin that later when he was older, he 'even refused to enter the door of the theatre'.[60] Ba Jin revisited the debauched

local opera scene in *Qiu* 秋 (Autumn, 1940), the final instalment of his phenomenally successful *Jiliu* 激流 (Turbulent Stream) trilogy. The *dan* actor featured here is one Zhang Bixiu 張碧秀, who first appears at a birthday banquet in *Jia* 家 (The Family, 1933), the first volume of the trilogy, and is supported by Gao Ke'an 高克安, the fourth son of the Gao patriarch.[61] In *Autumn*, Ba Jin takes a closer look at him with a plot duplicated almost exactly from 'A Second Mother' and his autobiography – only in this case the listener to his story is the adult Gao Juexin 高覺新.[62]

In *Autumn*, as in his autobiography, Ba Jin portrays the female impersonator as yet another victim of a corrupt social system, comparable in his status to concubines and courtesans: 'illness, old age, and the changeable tastes of the Chengdu elite loom as the major threats to their precarious livelihoods.'[63] Having been forced into his role, he is more to be pitied than censured. Likewise, almost all previous studies read 'A Second Mother' as merely an exposé that presents the actor as a victim of sexual and financial exploitation.[64] To be sure, this reading tallies well with the habitual characterization of Ba Jin as a left-wing writer, and the relations between the actor and his patrons are presented, in his own words, as unequivocally exploitative. But to read it exclusively along this line does more to obscure than to edify.

On the one hand, this leftist reading disregards the personal aspect of the story and Ba Jin's own development as a writer. In an essay written in 1958 to take stock of his published stories, Ba Jin divided them into two categories. In his early stories, he typically 'poured out' his 'surging passion' directly to readers, aiming to express 'the sorrow of people who have lost youth, activities, freedom, happiness and love', as well as to attack 'the irrational capitalist system'. He also 'preferred to tell a story in a melancholy or even solemn tone'. By contrast, 'in my late writings, I no longer let loose my feelings without restraint. I no longer tediously elaborated on plots as before. I focused a little more on life and let this life hint at or express my ideas and feelings. Let readers come to their own conclusions.'[65] Even though no mention is made of 'A Second Mother' in this essay, this periodization corresponds strongly to Ba Jin's reworkings of the story. If the original tale, told in a 'melancholy' tone, is brimming with 'surging passion' and speaks 'directly to readers', the relevant episodes in his autobiography and *Autumn* are written in a naturalistic manner, leaving readers to 'come to their own conclusions' – the most obvious sign being the switch of narrative voice from first to third person.

More importantly, to read the story as no more than an indictment of social injustices is to erase the complex meanings of cross-dressing itself. In fact, this reading is partially belied by the protagonist/narrator's own conflicting sentiments. Towards the end of the story, while painfully aware that the actor's womanly manners were beaten into him and proclaiming to devote his life to dismantling this repressive regime, the now-adult narrator nonetheless longs for the return of his 'second mother':

> Now I have been freed from the fetters of family life and enjoy a considerable measure of liberty. Besides, I have grown into a strong young man. What I want the most is my second mother back, so that we could live as happily together as we did before and that I could reciprocate the warmth she gave me. But where could I find her?[66]

When the actor first reveals her true identity to the boy and offers to demonstrate it by removing the fake coiffure, the boy grabs her wrist and says: 'Leave it on! You have combed it so glossy. If you disturb it, you'll have to go through the trouble all over again!'[67] He is happy with the actor's female look. Similarly, the actor readily accepts the new 'son,' who reminds of the long-lost younger brother. As a result, in this surreal scene we have the boy tenderly calling out 'Mother!' while the other replies with 'Little Brother!' (64–5). In this way, theatrical cross-dressing, a repressive institution designed to trap men in alien gender

and social roles, becomes a liberating force that allows lost souls to assume roles which otherwise would have been denied to them.[68]

Our understanding of this story is further complicated by the series of revisions it went through. For a 1934 reprint, Ba Jin 'changed half of it, including the title'.[69] In this new version, simply titled 'Mother', the actor is already dressed as a woman when he meets the boy and his uncle in the theatre; it is only later at his home that he reveals his true identity, and the boy is somewhat sceptical. This change, possibly inspired by the photo shoot incident recorded in the autobiography, flirts with the potential scandal of a man in drag walking freely in public, while in the original offstage cross-dressing is strictly confined to domestic spaces.[70] Ba Jin further revised the story in the late 1950s for its inclusion in his *Collected Works* published by the state-sponsored People's Literature Publishing House. In this final version, the lamentable mistress turns out to be a woman all along! Paradoxically, Ba Jin's continuous revising, whether voluntary or forced, has made the 'second mother' more and more of a woman: 'I have completely become a woman!'[71]

From 1933 to 1959, over the span of a quarter century, Ba Jin wrote and rewrote the same story at least five times, attesting to an unusual obsession with the theme.[72] Regrettably, the 'second mother' was never to return either to the boy or to Ba Jin's literary imagination; after all, 'the old way of life has been swept away by new forces. Someone like her stands no chance of survival in this day and age.'[73]

Conclusion

Both texts shared a similar fate. On the one hand, they were subsequently censored and suppressed by their authors and state-run publishers, either by relentless rewriting or by exclusion from later collections. More significantly, both contemporary and later critics have stubbornly interpreted these works as mere fantasies or parables, thus erasing the historical and personal experiences of cross-dressers themselves. As observed by Garber, again and again, the central figure of the story, 'the transvestite is looked through or away from, appropriated to tell another kind of story, a story less disturbing or dangerous, because less problematic and undecidable'.[74]

On a different level, Foucault's remarks on hermaphrodites hold equally true in this case: modern Western (as well as East Asian) societies have become obsessed with 'the reality of the body', with 'deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances'.[75] The reason for this obsession – mania even – seems to be that we do not have the cultural contexts or stereotypes for such anomalous occurrences which are too disturbing not to be explained away.

The transvestite continued to be feared and ridiculed even as he entertained and bewitched his audiences, both men and women: 'men see "a woman being impersonated," and women see "a man impersonating."'[76] When safely confined within the invisible walls of the stage, the 'man who plays the part of a woman'[77]is indulged – idolized even, but he is not allowed to occupy a place among the common men and women in the mortal realm: cruelly exposed, Mrs Ren hurriedly returns to the stage; the boy in Ba Jin's story, as yet untainted by rigid moral codes, embraces the actor as his real mother – even so, it does not last. The transvestite figure is typically portrayed as an intruder, dead set against the neat gender binarism of 'real' men and women. The heart of the matter lies in the cross-dresser's very ambiguity and undecidability, a *signifiant* for which common men and women struggle to find the *signifié*, and which they self-righteously read as absence and therefore a lack of value – 'going AWOL from one's assigned place in the social hierarchy'.[78]

It is in this sense that Garber seeks to carve out a 'third space of possibility' for him: 'The "third" is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis – a crisis which is symptomatized by *both* the overestimation *and* the underestimation of crossdressing. … The "third" is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility.'[79] More

importantly, Garber urges us to reconcile ourselves with the uneasy fact that as 'transvestism creates culture', 'culture [also] creates transvestites'.[80] Established cultural forces, in their capacity to create literary effects, would continue, grudgingly yet unapologetically, to conjure up the transvestite figure to embody their deep-seated anxieties over 'the constructedness (rather than the naturalness, literality, biology, or essence) of male and female as culturally marked categories', for '*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself'.[81] To behold the transvestite figure is more than a guilty pleasure that '[partakes] of a strong erotic motivation'[82]; it is an epistemological necessity. In this sense, Lu Xun is right in claiming that the image of the female impersonator 'hangs eternally in the windows of our photography studios and in the hearts of our citizens'.[83] On the other hand, it is as hard to fill Mr Ren's empty heart after Mrs Ren's departure as it is to find a new tenant for her bedroom.

The transvestite figures confuse and exasperate as much as they tantalize and entertain, their very existence presenting a permanent 'category crisis'.[84] They would return, after a long interval, in Li Bihua's 李碧華 *Bawang bieji* 霸王別姬 (Farewell My Concubine, 1985) and Chen Kaige's sensational screen adaptation (1993), as well as David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1987), to 'startle' and 'way-lay' many and to fascinate and 'haunt' even more.[85] Lu Xun's barbed satire would prove a prophecy: the art of men impersonating women really is 'the most noble, most eternal, and most universal' of arts in China.

Notes

1 Stephen Gill, ed., *William Wordsworth* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 219.

2 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

3 Charlotte Suthrell, *Unzipping Gender: Sex, Cross-Dressing and Culture* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), 39.

4 Cheng Yu'ang 程宇昂, *Ming Qing shiren yu Nandan* 明清士人與男旦 [Ming and Qing Literati and Female Impersonators] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), Chapter 1.

5 Qian Nanyang 錢南揚, ed., *Yongle Dadian xiwen sanzhong jiaozhu* 永樂大典戲文三種校注 [A Collated and Annotated Edition of Three Xiwen Plays in the Yongle Canon] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 1–3.

6 Regina S. Llamas, trans., *Top Graduate Zhang Xie: The Earliest Extant Chinese Southern Play* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 274–5. For the Chinese original, see Qian Nanyang, ed., *Yongle Dadian xiwen sanzhong jiaozhu*, 160.

7 Zhu Yu 朱彧, *Pingzhou ketan* 萍州可談 [Casual Talks of Pingzhou] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 1–3. Discussed in Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 119.

8 Zhou Mi 周密, *Kuixin zazhi* 癸辛雜誌 [A Miscellany of the Year Guixin] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 109. Discussed in Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 119.

9 Ibid. All unattributed translations are my own.

10 See Cheng Yu'ang, *Ming Qing shiren yu nandan*.

11 Kang Wenqing, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900–1950* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 135–44.

12 David Der-wei Wang, 'Impersonating China', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles,*

Reviews (CLEAR) 25 (2003): 133–4.

13 Lu Xun, 'On Photography and Related Matters', in *Jottings under Lamplight*, trans. Kirk A. Denton, ed. Eileen J. Cheng and Kirk A. Denton (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2017), 268–9. See also Siu Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 15–26.

14 Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), Chapter 4. See also Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995).

15 Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago Press, 1992), 25.

16 Ibid., 23.

17 Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, Chapters 2 and 5; Sarah E. Stevens, 'The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China', *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 3 (2003): 82–103.

18 Yunxiang Gao, 'Soo Yong (楊秀 ca.1903–1984): A Chinese American Actress and Cultural Interpreter', *Rollins Archives* (blog), 6 July 2020. https://blogs.rollins.edu/libraryarchives/2020/07/06/soo-yong-%e6%9d%a8%e7%a7%80-ca-1903-1984-a-chinese-american-actress-and-cultural-interpreter/. (accessed 30 March 2023).

19 *Ci Hu* 刺虎 [Assassinating the Tiger General]. Fox Movietone News Story 5-281, Fox Films, 1930. https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/MVTN/id/2191/rec/1. (accessed 1 February 2023), emphasis added.

20 Scholars like Howard Chiang have extensively studied the transgender issue in China, but their focus is largely on the contemporary (especially post-socialist) period. See for example the essays collected in Howard Chiang, ed., *Transgender China* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2012).

21 Ding Xilin 丁西林, 'Dear Husband', trans. Bonnie S. McDougall and Flora Lam. *Renditions* 69 (2008): 70. 'Qin'ai de zhangfu' was first published in the Shanghai-based magazine *Taiping yang*, and was then included, along with two other plays, in *Yizhi mafeng ji qita dumuju* (1925), 37–70. All his one-act plays, seven in total, were later collected in *Xilin dumuju ji* (1947). In the 1950s and 1960s three selections of his shorter plays were published in mainland China – *Ding Xilin juzuo xuan* (1955), *Yizhi mafeng ji qita* (1959) and *Yapo* (1963) – but none reprinted the piece. It was out of print for nearly four decades until its inclusion in *Ding Xilin juzuo quanji*, vol. 1 (1985), 23–44.

22 Ibid., 69.

23 Ibid., 70.

24 For a recent appraisal of Ding Xilin's contribution to modern Chinese theatre, see John B. Weinstein, 'Ding Xilin and Chen Baichen: Building a Modern Theatre through Comedy', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 20, no. 2 (2008): 92–130.

25 See Xiaomei Chen, Introduction to *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) for a brief but highly informative account of the history of this genre.

26 A brief biography can be found in Li-hua Ying, *Historical Dictionary of Modern Chinese Literature* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 34–5.

27 Sun Qingsheng 孫慶升, ed., *Ding Xilin yanjiu ziliao* 丁西林研究資料 [Research Material on Ding Xilin] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1986), 24.

28 Ibid., 3 and 7–8; Chen, Introduction, 9 and 48 n18.

29 Chen, Introduction, 9.

30 See Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (London:

Picador, 2003), 98–101 for a brief account of the Boulton and Park scandal.

31 Ding Xilin, ‘Dear Husband’, 63.

32 Ibid., 64.

33 Ibid., 64–5.

34 Ibid., 70.

35 Ibid., 71.

36 Ibid., 75.

37 Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl and Dorothy Ko, eds., *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) offers an overview of the theoretical formation of modern Chinese womanhood.

38 Ding Xilin, ‘Dear Husband’, 71.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 65.

41 Sun Qingsheng, ed., *Ding Xilin yanjiu ziliao*, 140, 148 and 171.

42 Kong Qingdong 孔慶東, ‘Shilun Ding Xilin juzuo de weimei qingxiang’ 試論丁西林劇作中的唯美傾向 [A Preliminary Study of the Aestheticist Leanings of Ding Xilin’s Plays]. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中國現代文學研究叢刊 [Studies in Modern Chinese Literature] 17, no. 2 (1995): 247.

43 Ding Xilin, *Yizhi mafeng ji qita dumuju*, 1, emphasis added. The masculine third-person pronoun ‘ta’ 他 is used throughout the passage to refer to Huang Fengqing. Although evidence shows that ‘Dear Husband’ was staged at least once by an obscure theatrical troupe, it obviously did not make much of an impact. See Sun Qingsheng, ed., *Ding Xilin yanjiu ziliao*, 139.

44 Ba Jin 巴金, *Mabu* 抹布 [The Rag] (Beiping: Xingyun tang shudian, 1933), 57. For an opuscule like ‘A Second Mother’, it has a surprisingly complicated textual history. First published in the 1933 collection *Mabu* with another autobiographically inspired story, it was soon revised and republished in *Chenmo* (1934), 197–237 under the new title ‘Muqin’ 母親 (Mother). This revised version was later reprinted in *Bainiao zhi ge* (1936), 105–34; rather confusingly, the old title was restored. The story went through another round of heavy revision in the 1950s before its inclusion in *Ba Jin wenji*, vol. 8 (1959), 17–32 under the abbreviated title ‘Mother’. This version was in turn reprinted in *Ba Jin quanji*, vol. 9 (1989), 450–63. Thus, three substantially different versions can be identified and numbered respectively as Text I (*Mabu*), Text II (*Chenmo*, *Bainiao zhi ge*) and Text III (*Ba Jin wenji*, *Ba Jin quanji*).

45 For a description of homosexual activity in turn-of-the-century Chengdu, see Li Jieren, *Ripple on Stagnant Water: A Novel of Sichuan in the Age of Treaty Ports*, trans. Bret Sparling and Yin Chi (Portland, ME: MerwinAsia, 2014), 125. For a general description of the *demi-monde* of the city, see Wang Di 王笛, *Xiaoshi de gucheng: Qing mo Min chu Chengdu de richang shenghuo jiyi* 消失的古城——清末民初成都的日常生活記憶 [The Lost Ancient City: Memories of Everyday Life in Chengdu in Late Qing and Early Republican Times] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2019), 67–77.

46 Ba Jin, *Mabu*, 37.

47 Ibid., 38.

48 Ibid., 44.

49 Ba Jin’s Chinese text uses different pronouns for the two personae of the ‘second mother’. While the ‘young man’ is referred to by the masculine third-person pronoun ‘ta’ 他, the feminine equivalent ‘ta’ 她 is applied to the ‘woman’. In ‘her’ story, ‘she’ refers to ‘her’ old self as ‘ta’ 他. Toward the end of the story, the narrator refers to his long-lost surrogate mother as ‘ta’ 她.

50 Ba Jin, *Mabu*, 54.

51 Ibid., 57.

52 Ibid., 58.

53 Ba Jin 巴金, *Ba Jin zizhuan* 巴金自傳 [An Autobiography of Ba Jin] (Shanghai: Diyi chubanshe, 1934); Danchen 丹晨, 'Qinqing he "Di'er de muqin"' 親情和《第二的母親》 [Kinship and 'A Second Mother'], *Bolan qunshu*博覽群書 [Chinese Book Review Monthly] 6 (1995): 7–8, points out an autobiographical element in the story, but fails to discern the exact nature of this affinity.

54 See Gerald Chan. 'China and the Esperanto Movement', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 15 (1986): 1–18.

55 Ba Jin, *Ba Jin zizhuan*, 98–9. Note the shared (presumably stage) name with Ding Xilin's Huang Fengqing.

56 Ibid., 99–100.

57 Ibid., 100.

58 Ibid., 101.

59 Ibid., 86–90.

60 Ibid., 101.

61 Stapleton discusses Zhang Bixiu and the phenomenon of 'boy actresses' in Chapter 4 of *Fact in Fiction*, but fails to take into account 'A Second Mother', Ba Jin's earliest treatment of the theme.

62 Ba Jin, *Qiu*, 491 and 495–7.

63 Stapleton, *Fact in Fiction*, 115.

64 Danchen, 'Qinqing he "Di'er de muqin,"' 7–8; Kang, *Obsession*, 138–9; McDougall, 'Cross-Dressing in Modern Chinese Fiction, Drama and Film', 125.

65 Ba Jin 巴金, *Selected Works of Ba Jin*. 2nd ed. vol. 4 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2005), 136–7. For the Chinese original, see Ba Jin 巴金, *Ba Jin quanji* 巴金全集 [Complete Works of Ba Jin], vol. 20 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1986–1994), 519–20.

66 Ba Jin, *Mabu*, 66–7.

67 Ibid., 47.

68 See Wang, 'Impersonating China', 146. Wang detects an Anarchist agenda in the story, which can be corroborated the fact that the title of each story in *Bainiao zhi ge* is coupled up with its Esperanto translation.

69 Ba Jin 巴金, *Chenmo* 沉默 [Silence] (Shanghai: Shenghuo shudian, 1934), 1–2.

70 Cross-dressing out of the theatre context was still taboo enough to cause a public sensation in turn-of-the-century China. See Zhang Jie 張傑, *Quwei kaoju: Zhongguo gudai tongxinglian tukao* 趣味考據——中國古代同性戀圖考 [Pictorial Studies in Homosexuality of Traditional China] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2008), 457–67 for a selection of such cases.

71 To the best of my knowledge, no previous critic has straightened out the thorny textual history of the story. David Wang and Wenqing Kang have failed to consult Text I, while McDougall and Danchen seem to have been unaware of Text II, despite claims to the contrary.

72 That is, counting his autobiography, the novel *Autumn* and the three versions of 'A Second Mother'.

73 Ba Jin, *Mabu*, 67.

74 Garber, *Vested Interests*, 236.

75 Michel Foucault, Introduction to *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New

York: Pantheon Books, 1980), vii–viii.

76 Lu Xun, ‘On Photography and Related Matters’, 268.

77 Ibid.

78 This is Seneca’s complaint against ‘either men dressing in clothing appropriate to women or men making themselves look youthful – both of which suggest to Seneca the wish to serve as the sexual object of other men’. John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 21.

79 Garber, *Vested Interests*, 11.

80 Ibid., 16.

81 Ibid., 17 and 47, emphasis in original.

82 Wang, ‘Impersonating China’, 145.

83 Lu Xun, ‘On Photography and Related Matters’, 268.

84 Garber, *Vested Interests*, 16.

85 Discussed in Dylan K. Wang, ‘“An Ideal Woman”: Cross-Dressing & Male Homoerotic Desire in Modern Chinese Literature’, MA dissertation, SOAS University of London, 2020.

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Chapter 3

Translating the Life of Jin Xing as a Transgender Woman

Yahia Ma

In 2005, 半夢: 金星自傳 (*ban meng: jin xing zizhuan*, *Half Dream: Jin Xing's Autobiography*) was published in simplified Chinese in mainland China by Citic Publishing House. The author of the book is Jin Xing, a well-known contemporary dancer, choreographer, TV host and media celebrity, and her personal and professional life stories have been considered as 'a testament to the remarkable pace and direction of change in China's modern dance world'.[1] Among her many social identities, Jin is a *transgender* woman, a term I use, following Susan Stryker, to refer to people 'who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender'.[2] I use *she/her* pronouns for Jin Xing both before and after her gender affirmation transition.

Innumerable stories about Jin Xing have been told and retold in China and elsewhere within different narrative frameworks. The English-speaking world frames Jin Xing as a 'trailblazer in her conservative nation',[3] the *Oprah* of China, but at the same time, it highlights the variety of her identities as a former colonel and dancer in the People's Liberation Army, educator, actress, choreographer, TV personality, wife and mother of three adoptees. In this context, in 2007, the English version *Shanghai Tango: A Memoir,* a collaborative translation by Jin Xing with Catherine Texier, was published by Atlantic Books in the UK. This English version calls Jin 'one of China's foremost ballerinas' and 'a mother of three'.[4] This is similar to the 2005 French edition *Rien N'arrive Par Hasard* translated by Stéphane Lévêque and Isabelle Verhaeghen Kegel for Robert Laffont (the first version in an Indo-European language),[5] which promotes Jin Xing as '*un colonel de l'armée chinoise devient danseuse étoile ...* ' (a colonel in the Chinese army who becomes a star dancer ...) and the autobiography as '*[un] document choc et une étonnante quête de liberté*' ([a] shocking document and an astonishing quest for freedom).[6] The publicity tags in both the French and English versions, while focusing on quite different aspects of Jin's identity, illustrate in brief the process of what Mona Baker calls '(re)framing', which according to Baker can 'draw on practically any linguistic or non-linguistic resource, from paralinguistic devices such as intonation and typography to visual resources such as colour and image, to numerous linguistic devices' and many more that, intentionally or not, shape the significance of a text for readers.[7]

The Chinese text and its translations bring up questions of identity, existence and the act of framing, which is 'the application of conceptual categories to make sense of people and events and to market representations of those lives to specific audiences'.[8] Translation plays a crucial role in naturalizing and promoting such stories across linguistic boundaries and translators – whether voluntarily or involuntarily – re-present stories for specific target audiences. Translations of contemporary Chinese texts therefore produce specific readings of Chinese history and politics that, by reframing the source text, can radically alter its significance and reception. In this chapter, I specifically examine the simplified Chinese version 半夢: 金星自傳 (*Half Dream: Jin Xing's Autobiography*) and the English version *Shanghai Tango: A Memoir* by Jin Xing with Catherine Texier to explore how this translation

is framed for a new audience, and how it connects two different linguistic, cultural and historical contexts.

In a life that spans China's modern history – from the Cultural Revolution, and the Reform and Opening Up movement, to 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and the emergence of China as a global superpower – Jin Xing's personal story is, for readers in the West, entangled in and framed by ideological narratives around the development of socialist China influenced by Western neoliberalism and postmodernism. An examination of the shifting frames used to unpack Jin Xing's life for English-speaking readers reveals how such frames channel Western re-readings of non-Western trans lives. Focusing and unpacking the re-casting of Jin Xing's life stories and various identities, in the context of China's opening to transnational neoliberalism in the post-Mao era, I argue that *Shanghai Tango: A Memoir*'s reframing of 半夢: 金星自傳, as Lisa Rofel indicates in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, 'rests in part on the premise of a continuity in the political system of governance, coupled with a discontinuity in the state's promotion of radical marketisation and privatisation'.[9]

The English translation *Shanghai Tango* presents Jin's performances of both dance and surgery in a style of complex, intermittent narrative, in contrast with the strictly chronological framework of the originating Chinese text. In both versions various linguistic and paralinguistic resources are used to (re)frame Jin Xing's life story. In the English translation, Jin Xing is introduced to the Anglophone world as a superstar, a military officer-turned-pioneer in 'gender-reaffirmation surgery', a sex symbol and a wife – foregrounding the construction of Jin's multiple social identities alongside her gender identity. This creates a tension between Jin Xing's assigned gender, assumed sexuality and her trans identity that acts to highlight the 'homosexual' element of her story and indirectly reinforce concepts of traditional gender roles and heteronormative sexuality. In contrast, the Chinese edition plots Jin Xing's journey of personal growth as a sequence from her childhood memories (童年記憶 *tongnian jiyi*) to her 'path for growth' (成長之路 *chengzhang zhi lu*), including her studies in the United States (留學美國 *liuxue meiguo*), her journey to Europe (歐洲之旅 *ouzhou zhi lü*) and her return to the Chinese motherland (重回祖國 *chong hui zuguo*), as clearly stated in the chapter titles of the text.

Framing Jin Xing as a transgender woman

The English translation of Jin Xing's lived experience as a transgender woman is situated within stories of China's opening to transnational neoliberalism in post-Mao China. A sea change has swept through China during Jin' Xing's life largely as a consequence of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up project that began in 1979 and appeared, in the West at least to 'replace socialist experimentation with the "universal human nature" imagined as the essential ingredient of cosmopolitanism worldliness',[10] as Lisa Rofel argues. China's transformation took off in earnest in the early 1990s. This coincided with the beginning of Jin Xing's global celebrity as a dancer and choreographer, particularly in Europe and the United States, although the avant-garde works that she was associated with had first appeared in China in the 1980s and were already synonymous with Chinese elite culture.[11]

Before I discuss how *Shanghai Tango* reframes Jin's story for a new audience in the West, I need to clarify how the concept of framing is understood in translation studies. It was introduced to the field in the 1980s but was first discussed in depth in Albrecht Neubert and Christiane Nord's *Translation as Text* in 1992. Their key question was, 'how is it that texts manage to use linguistic copresence as an information carrier between sender and receiver?'[12] For Neubert and Nord, the process of translation is an 'actualizing' one that involves choices of words and expressions that reflect the degree of mutual knowledge between source and target languages. Neubert and Nord argue that, in translation, texts are actual systems and languages are virtual ones. Texts are actual because 'they involve

real choices that text producers and translators must make from the linguistic repertoire to activate elements of the [mutual] knowledge repertoire'.[13] Thus, to unpack the framing of translations of non-normative lives and sexualities for readers in a different culture, we must first acknowledge the variety of framing gestures that go beyond the merely linguistic. As noted by Brent Hayes Edwards, these can include a particular signifying content and its deployment as links to another context.[14]

Framing involves positioning, delimiting and articulating in relation to a large discursive field. Translations of non-normative lives and voices are, as Baer notes,[15] 'almost always accompanied by paratextual framing', which is complex and sensitive politically, sexually or in other potentially 'uncomfortable' ways. Following Baer, I am interested in frames as repertoires that illuminate how Jin Xing's desires are repressed and how her lived experience is situated in *Shanghai Tango* within another narrative: that of how neoliberalism works in China. Judith Butler's discussion of explicit and implicit censorship as operations of power is helpful here.

> *The operation of implicit and powerful forms of censorship suggests that the power of the censor is not exhausted by explicit state policy or regulation. Such implicit forms of censorship may be, in fact, more efficacious than explicit forms of censorship in enforcing a limit on speakability*.[16]

Drawing on the conceptualizations of framing and implicit censorship, an analysis of the shifting frames used to package Jin's life story for English-speaking audiences and the role of translation in these acts of storytelling, framing and self-translation reveals how such frames direct readings of personal lives like Jin Xing's.

Jin Xing as Golden Star

> *At the Shenyang army kindergarten my reputation grew so fast that a TV crew came to film a documentary about me, the little rising star. Maybe my name sealed my fate: Jin Xing means Golden Star in Chinese*.[17]

In 'Golden Star', the opening chapter of *Shanghai Tango*, Jin Xing gives this brief, vivid account of the inextricable link between her name and her virtually life-long fame. Jin was born in Qingyuan County, Shenyang, Liaoning province in an ethnic Korean-Chinese (朝鮮族 *chao xiang zu*) family in China and asserts in *Half Dream* – though not in *Shanghai Tango* – that 'I was born in China; however, in terms of life experience, I am an authentic Korean'.[18] In 1973, at the age of nine, she began training with a military dance troupe in Shenyang and afterwards trained with the People's Liberation Army dance troupe in Beijing from 1980 to 1984 before being selected for a one-year intensive dance training at the Guangdong Dance School in China's Guangzhou in 1987.

In 1988, Jin Xing won an Asian Cultural Council scholarship to study dance at a modern dance company in New York. She later travelled to Italy and Brussels in the early 1990s to live and work. In 1994, she returned to Beijing for what in *Shanghai Tango* she calls 'sex reassignment surgery', officially known in mainland China at that time as sex change surgery (變性手術, *bian xing shoushu*) and nowadays as 'gender reaffirmation surgery' (性別重置手術, *xingbie chongzhi shoushu*).[19] After moving to Shanghai following the surgery, Jin founded her own dance troupe, the Jin Xing Dance Troupe, in 1999 and also launched a career as a television personality, eventually creating and hosting a highly successful TV show. In a life that has therefore spans most of China's modern history from the Reform and Opening Up, social, cultural and economic transformations influenced by post-Cold War capitalism and neoliberal capitalism, and a unified socialist China with Chinese characteristics, it was perhaps inevitable that Jin Xing's life story would become thoroughly

entangled with and framed by the ideological narratives surrounding the development of socialist China and the influence of Western neoliberalism when Jin Xing's autobiography was published in different languages globally.

In *Shanghai Tango*, Jin and Texier demonstrate an Orientalist portrayal of a transgender subject with implicit censorship of sexual desires by Jin and Texier while the transgender Jin Xing has long been famed as a golden star for her radical alterity as a non-normative subject. Here my primary concern does not entail what is hidden in the 'Orientalism' of the English text, but rather of the text's surface, or what Edward Said would call 'its exteriority to what it describes'.[20] In many ways, *Shanghai Tango* embodies a mysterious Orientalist fantasy image of the Far East. This is most evident in chapter titles such as 'Golden Star', 'Crying Dragon' and 'Shanghai Tango'. 'Crying Dragon', a chapter in the English text and a subsection in the Chinese text, provides a scene or setting for an Orientalist frame that highlights a tension between explicit and implicit censorship of trans identity. *Crying Dragon* is the title of a piece of Korean music to the accompaniment of which Jin 'kneels in the middle of the stage, clad entirely in white and with a white gag in … [his] mouth, in the traditional pose and dress of a Chinese man in full mourning for his father' in a performance at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina,[21] during her studies in the United States. After this tearful 'phantasmagoric' performance, she is asked by a journalist if the piece is meant to symbolize the events of Tian'anmen Square and she replies: 'I am not a political artist.'[22] *Shanghai Tango* spends two paragraphs on this performance, which, in Jin's words, 'express[es] the pain of a man exiled from his native land' and hastily the episode with the statement 'It's a very personal work'.[23] The original Chinese text describes a considerably more detailed response to the journalist's question:

> 我回答說:'不是。我是藝術家,永遠都是跟政治分開的。我不會刻意去要求作品要去表現什麼, 好作品的影響力應該是自然產生的, 我主要是表現思鄉之情, 沒有其他的意思。'[24]
>
> *I answered, 'I am an artist, permanently detached from political issues. I would not deliberately use my work to express anything particular. The influence of a good work should come naturally. I simply wanted to express nothing else but my homesickness.'*

If the two accounts of the *Crying Dragon* are a result of censoring the translation for Western readers that haunts the author's and the translators' task, the process rules out certain possibilities and realities. Rather than a simple act of censorship, what makes the process more complex is the fact that there is a great deal of reasons for this implicit framing that structures a text from the inside. By presenting Jin as 'not a political artist', the English text leaves what is visible and what is not. Moreover, Jin's father in the Chinese text is amusingly represented as a person who was 很紅 (*hen hong,* very red) and given a red hot nickname '金馬列' (*jin ma lie,* Jin the Marxist-Leninist). He is a doctrinaire 'red' whose nickname in the army is *Jin the Marxist-Leninist*. Interestingly, red – one of the most visible signs of Communist Chineseness to Westerners – can be interpreted as meaning that her father is both a loyal and enthusiastic supporter of the 'red regime' (紅色政權, *hong se zheng quan*) and enormously popular with his red army peers.

Paying attention to such framing may offer a glimpse into the growth of 'knowledge', which, as Said argues, is a 'process of *selective* accumulation, displacement, deletion, rearrangement, and insistence within what has been called a research consensus' (my emphasis).[25] Is the purpose of Jin Xing's rearrangement and rephrasing of her father's 'redness' to attract Western audiences and cater to their stereotypes about China? Jin Xing could easily present herself more neutrally as 'a Western-trained dancer and choreographer who had achieved some notable success in Europe and the USA'.[26] As Gloria Davies and M. E. Davies note, Jin Xing has never been 'accused of catering to a Western orientalist appetite'.[27] She is decidedly not one of those Chinese artists who have 'secured for themselves an international role as authoritative interpreters of China abroad while at the

same time trading on that international fame to build and develop their own commercial and artistic enterprises within China'.[28] My point is that the processes of translation necessarily construct revised textualizations of our identities and desires, which then 'regulate and shape the way we understand, speak about, negotiate, accept, and refuse different projections of our selves'.[29] In translation, there is always a renegotiation of identity and ideological struggle across languages. Within this, we can often detect a process of self-censorship that reflects 'an individual moral/ethical struggle between the individual and society'.[30]

Jin Xing as a pioneer

The glamour of Jin Xing's lived experience is overtly built on putting her 'gender reassignment surgery' under the spotlight. This radical act of self-affirmation is overdetermined by the transition of 1990s China to a hybrid state-capitalist market economy that relies, as Rofel notes, on 'ideological articulations such as the utopian myth of development and the idea that China is in a "transitional period" toward "socialism with Chinese characteristics"'.[31] In deciding to return home for her surgery, Jin Xing became a pioneer of transgender identities and gender confirmation surgery in China. Her decision was a declaration of what Rofel describes as the 'various dreams, longings, and aspirations … constitutive of their [Chinese citizens'] belonging in a post-socialist, neoliberal-dominated world'.[32] As if to confirm Rofel's theorization, Jin and Texier's translation was marketed by Atlantic Books as an account – 'dramatic, graceful, and deeply felt as a *pas de deux* – of someone whose body felt "alien" and who therefore *braved* "pioneering surgery in Communist China"' on the back cover.

A comparison with the Chinese expression '廣受爭議' (*guang shou zheng yi*), that is, 'highly controversial', used on the cover of Citic Publishing's Chinese edition, brings into sharp relief the Anglophone framing of Jin Xing as a heroic trailblazer of gender self-emancipation. This typically Western framing of innovators is further evidenced in the prologue, where Jin is presented as 'one of China's foremost ballerinas' and 'a mother of three'.

It is unclear to what extent, if at all, Jin Xing was directly involved in the English translation, but its packaging of her as a pioneer is further underscored by the English edition's repeated reworkings of many passages in the original. This begins with the description of the setting of her surgery in Beijing, which is characterized by the presence of 'a camera, mikes, cables, and lighting paraphernalia'.[33] To further dramatize the climactic scene, the memoir opens with the surgery and then flashes back with the first page of the English edition paying a tearful tribute to Jin's mother:

> *… Mother has come out for a last goodbye … She is leaning against the door frame, tears running down her face. She makes no attempt to wipe them away. I have rarely seen her cry before and my heart aches at the sight now. She has devoted herself to me, her only son. In China, it's the son who continues the family line; the son who is showered with love; the son who matters most. And now she is about to lose her son and gain another daughter.*[34]

This is not a scene governed exclusively by the sense of dramatization. The parallel structure ('the son who … ' etc.) calls attention to the discourse of filial piety and protecting male lineage at the heart of Confucian ethics. English readers may or may not know that men in Chinese society are traditionally obliged to carry on their family's male bloodline. As Howard Chiang says, this is 'a central tenet of the Confucian expectation from a filial son',[35] which is also a central feature of Western 'orientialist' framings of China. The trio of parallel clauses compels readers to take note of things that can be considered as 'unfilial': failing to

produce offspring, especially male offspring, is the most serious. If such rendition is to effectively dramatize the reproduction (filming) of the surgery – an intervention that will 'change [Jin] beyond anything … she can imagine', the door frame in the English translation appears to mirror the very space outside the frame within which the sociocultural norms that Jin is irrevocably defying prevail. In this way, a new narrative is inserted that amplifies rather than eradicates the radicalization of Jin's rebellious, pioneering nature and provides a revolutionary reinterpretation for the Anglophone audience.

At the heart of this dramatic radicalization is the potential of the scene's theatricality to engage both viewers of the film and readers of the book in an experience that compels them to perform the English version's predetermined interpretation, one possibly made by the publishers rather than the translators. By means of this theatrical scene, which manipulates readers through moral education and emotional triggering, the first page of *Shanghai Tango* maximizes directorial control and heightens the spectator's sense of compassion at some risk of exaggerating the mother's trauma. At a metanarrative level, Jin and Texier present China itself as a site of suppression. Jin is reincorporated into the heteronormative society by drawing readers into the fold of a scene in which she may not be able to articulate her transgender identity in a way that runs contrary to the society's dominant discourses. The English translation presents Jin as a rebel against the semantically prescribed constraints and her body as a site of rebellion where norms are refused, challenged and troubled.

At a paratextual level, Jin Xing was presented as a gender-ambiguous figure associated with two dichotomies between a man and a woman on a micro scale and West and East on a macro scale. Such binary is exposed in particular in the images and accompanying captions in *Shanghai Tango*, where Jin Xing's photographs are turned from colour into black and white. For example, 'I was 26 years old' ('那年我26歲') becomes 'I attracted a lot of men because I had long hair, which made me look androgynous'; 'I had this photo taken for the ballet Half Dream in Beijing, 1993' (我表演芭蕾舞劇 《半夢》時的樣子, 1993 年於北京') becomes 'I had this picture taken for the first performance of *Half Dream* in China, in 1993. *Half Dream* expresses the ambiguity I feel at heart- caught between East and West, man and woman.'

The Chinese edition, unlike the English translation that highlights traditional tropes of transitioning as transgressive, does not register progressive attitudes towards transitioning, disobedience and non-reproductive sexuality.

> 媽媽送我的時候, 流下了眼淚。她這是在看兒子最後一眼,下次見到我, 就是女兒啦。媽媽伏在門口的牆上哭了半天, 她的內心是複雜的, 她為我承受了很多痛苦。但媽媽很剛強, 她不會說出來, 她會支持, 會讓時間去消化。 … 在去香山醫院的路上, 我流下了眼淚。我是在感慨, 我的這一生, 讓媽媽承擔的太多; 另外一個原因是, 我就要告別自己的男兒身, 同時也在感謝我的男兒身曾給了我28年的好經驗。[36]

By highlighting the depth of her gratitude for her mother's life-long support of Jin, as well as her self-reflection on the body through which Jin exercises her choice to transition, the Chinese version of this scene frames Jin Xing's struggle and mirrors her psychic anxiety in which she has lived. At the same time, it rewrites her identity through an entanglement of meaning, desire and empathy.

There is a telling shift in the English translation. It replaces '男兒身' (*nan er shen*, the body of a man or boy) with 'son'. The full import of the substitution becomes clear when Jin Xing and Dr Yang discuss the choice of silicone breast sizes. The artificial organs, we are informed, come 'in all sizes: 200 grams, 250 grams, large and small',[37] and the choice presented as routine. Jagose's analysis of the social meanings of clitoris, vagina and penis is relevant here. If these body parts are also routinely rehabilitated as 'metaphoric vehicles for gendered meanings and values originating and primarily exercised elsewhere, with little, if

any, consideration given to their neurophysiological structure, capacity, or function',[38] then the carefully selected medium-sized cup, as enthusiastically endorsed by the cameraman Li Xiaoming, invokes the seductive image of a 'real woman' unable to refuse the ecstasy of *becoming* this under 'blinding lights' and in the presence 'men in white overalls' (the film crew) scurrying about. Gazed at and filmed by a crew of men, it is far from a smooth, orderly, peaceful transition. As Jin reflects, 'it is as if they are getting a stage ready for a show'.[39]

Jin Xing (Not) as 'homosexual'?

There is an underlying undecidability, to use Emily Rose's term, that complicates discussions of gender, sexuality and desire in a trans text like *Half Dream*. The situation gets even more complicated in a translation. For Rose, undecidability is 'an inherent characteristic of texts written by or about trans people', and the extra layer of undecidability that translations add makes them 'the best place to explore and represent' the undecidability of trans texts.[40] In this section, I examine in more detail how Jin Xing's framing as both 'homosexual' and 'not homosexual' is used to tell the 'truth' (in other words, what Jin Xing wants to present as the truth) about her sexual desires by declaring 'I am not homosexual'. She explains that, in her youth, she was confused about her sexuality viewed from the perspective of her society and ran from the discourse of power that tried to categorize and control her by defining her sexuality and gender, and she ultimately remains undecidable to herself and perhaps to her readers too.

The first moments of Jin's sexual awakening involve a euphoric feeling of desire and longing for intimacy, as is especially clear in the intense olfactory response she describes in the first chapter of the English translation. It is a description of a thickly fetishist sexual response whose very existence marks 'the emergence of sexuality as a modern regime of knowledge and power'.[41] The English translation, however, is purified of a good deal of the olfactory vividness of the Chinese original.

> 有一次, 我媽媽有一個做紡織女工的同事, 請我和媽媽到她們鄉下去。我跟媽媽去了以後, 在鄉下住了一晚上。紡織女工有個哥哥, 20出頭, 人長得非常英俊, 一臉絡腮鬍子, 我稱他舅舅。晚上, 我自然和'舅舅'同睡一床。能躺在一個英俊男人的身邊, 我由衷地感到幸福。我還有一種奇怪的心理, 當聞到男人身上的氣息時, 我就覺得, 這是我需要的, 我喜歡的。所以, 每當媽媽說要到這個舅舅家裡來的時候, 我覺得比什麼事都高興, 就想跟他親近。[42]

> *One day, after we had moved to Shenyang, a young friend of my mother who worked in a weaving factory invited us to visit her family in the country. Her elder brother was there and his beauty took my breath away. He was tall and well built, with soft hair hanging down over his smoky eyes – a dark, sensual face, with the sexiest sideburns I had ever seen. I could not take my eyes off him … The boys I saw at the baths were nothing in comparison. But there was something else about this boy – he turned my glances. His looks were not merely amused or tender; they were seductive, out of the corner of his eyes. We stayed overnight and I had to share the brother's bed. As I listened to him fall asleep, his breathing becoming slow and deep in the dark, I realised I was listening to the powerful, even breaths of a man. I was happier than I had ever been.*[43]

The English translation suppresses the fetishistic element of olfaction, the sensorium that, as Mark Graham notes, 'confuses categories and challenges boundaries'.[44] Indeed, for Graham, to sniff something to unleash desire, you must *inhale* it and thus incorporate it into your own body although sniffing also pulls air into the body. A careful reading of the two paragraphs and para-texts shows that *Half Dream* and *Shanghai Tango* serve two

different moral projects: a vulgar, fetishistic, near pornographic description of the 'queer' smell and playfully sexualized kinship term in the Chinese version, and in the English version, a sanitized text informed by the popular bromance tropes that have emerged in Anglophone, and especially American, culture, which relate to masculine hegemony. In *Half Dream*, Jin is sexually stimulated and gratified by the lingering body and breath smells of a man whose nickname is '舅舅' (*jiu jiu*, signifying mother's brother). This is rendered in the English translation as sharing a bed with a brother, which appears to make sexually savouring his scent impossible. The young Jin Xing therefore only listens 'to the powerful, even breaths of a man'.

Is the olfactory the queerest of the senses? Graham's question is intriguing, but I argue that the English text translates queer desire from a more heteronormative standpoint than the Chinese text and thereby seeks to 'un-queer the text or to conceal its queerness',[45] as Marc Démont describes similar suppressive strategies in his typology of modes of translating queer texts. If smell is indeed the queerest of the senses, the deodorized English translation raises some troubling questions for a normative model of desire. What this passage shows is that the olfactory form of desire depicted in *Shanghai Tango* relies essentially on a visualized model of gendered smell and on essentialist notions of the politics of sex. If the reader is aware that this bed-sharing experience is in fact between a gender-affirming Jin Xing and a seductive man nicknamed Jiu Jiu, the insertion of 'the powerful' in the translation participates in concealing the queerness of Jin Xing's desire rather than invoking a queer sexuality. Thus, Jin, as both writer and co-translator, is a figure whose 'true' erotic behaviour and inner identity are hidden, through translation. The English text's repeated reframing of transgender desire both before and after Jin's transitioning can be read as an attempt to freeze the undecidability of transgender roles and desires and thus domesticate the multilayered nature of queerness and of a person like Jin Xing.

Jin's self-declaration 'I am not homosexual' illustrates the extent to which gender non-conforming persons struggle constantly to 'create new categories from the ruins of the old, new ways of being a body within the cultural field, and whole new languages of description'.[46] In 'Chapter IV: Journey to Europe' in *Half Dream*, after the French dancer Sylvie's confesses her love for Jin Xing in Rome, they have this brief conversation:

> [Jin Xing]: 這是不可能的事。(This is an impossible thing![47])
> [Sylvie]: 怎麼不可能? 你是個男孩子, 我是個女孩子, 談戀愛是很正常的事嘛。(Why impossible? You are a boy, I am a girl, it is normal for us to be in a relationship.)
> [Jin Xing]: 不, 我也是個女孩子。 我和你在心理上是一樣的, 我也想找個男人。(No, I am a girl too. Psychologically, you and I are the same. I am also after a man.)
> [Sylvie]: 那你是同性戀? (Are you homosexual?)
> [Jin Xing]: 我不是同性戀。(I'm not homosexual.)

In *Shanghai Tango*, the same conversation becomes one of those spaces Baer and Kaindl identify 'in which identities are negotiated, [and] where the local critically engages with the global'.[48]

> *Impossible.*
> *Why? Are you in love with another woman?*
> *No, I like men.*
> *You're gay!*
> *Not at all, I am a woman like you.*
> *Get out of here!*
> *No, I swear.*[49]

The subheading '我不是同性戀' (I am not homosexual, originally with quotation marks in Chinese) in which this dialogue occurs is removed in the English translation, perhaps to fit the English publisher's marketing of *Shanghai Tango* as 'a breathtaking story' and Jin Xing as a person that 'everyone in the West should know' as the British-based novelist Xiaolu Guo is quoted enthusing on the book's cover. Whatever the motivation, the translated dialogue functions as a space in which the language of gender and sexual identities, with their important rhetorical and ideological implications, can register 'the translator's attitude toward existing conceptualisations of gender/sexual identities, human sexual behaviours and moral norms'.[50] In contemporary China, the usual term for *homosexual, tong xing lian* (同性戀) has become a nexus where multiple narratives and interpretations intersect and contest or reinforce each other. *Tongxinglian*, as the historian Wenqing Kang notes, sounds more clinical and scientific to Chinese ears than ideologically ambiguous terms such as *tongxing'ai* (同性愛) and *tongxing lianai* (同性戀愛). The more overt framing of *tongxinglian*, however, also carries the pathological connotations of *homosexuality*. If the regulation of the English term is not 'simple act of censorship and silencing', as indicated by Butler,[51] the formerly 'unspeakable' self-declaration of homosexuality in the West's militaries perfectly illustrates the way in which the mechanism of censorship was later transferred to the figure of the transgender rather than the homosexual.

Of course, the term 'homosexual' only becomes unspeakable when used to describe oneself in suppressive environments such as the military dance troupe in which Jin's sexual energy was fully awakened. At the age of ten, she recalls in *Half Dream*, she saw a man's erect penis for first time, masturbated for a secretary in the military dance troupe in Shenyang at eighteen or nineteen, and at the same time as the encounter with him, she for the first time witnessed a man's ejaculation, which made her 'enormously curious, extremely excited, and slightly helpless'.[52] Considering the Chinese text's masturbatory undertone, it is telling that the English translation does not find traces of Jin's gender-affirming struggles and sexual awakening, which in *Half Dream* clearly grow out of, and are reinforced by, social norms around compulsory heterosexuality. What is more troubling in the English translation is, first, that the secretary becomes 'nineteen or twenty' and is explicitly described as 'older than we are'[53] and second, that after the graphic account of homosexually erotic masturbation, comes this insertion: 'In China, boys are not supposed to behave like that. Yet he has fully awoken my sexuality'.[54] The thickness and stickiness of the secretary's ejaculation are enhanced rather than diluted when Jin says, 'I feel uncomfortable and yet I find that myself have become aroused. Suddenly my hand is covered with a sticky fluid.'[55]

What kinds of framing do readers witness in the Chinese and English versions, respectively? And what kinds of scene are the translators, Texier in collaboration with Jin Xing, projecting on top of this spasmodic, sticky, 'quickie' orgasm? If the additional sentence 'I look at him but his eyes are closed again, as if he's gone back to sleep' in the English translation displaces any notion of intimacy, it also reveals the homosexualized construction of a victim of sexual repression (in the almost unconscious quickie orgasm) in place of a sexual awakening that ought to have been mutually satisfying. Consenting to offer the secretary a helping fist and becoming aroused herself, the young Jin Xing is abandoned to her horniness when the man inconveniently falls asleep. Readers of the English version come to understand that, as the secretary's arousal overtakes Jin's, a point pornographically marked by the man's ejaculation, Jin Xing disengages as a sexual actor and becomes, in that moment, the *subject* of pleasure.

Jin Xing as wife

Another layer of the 'successful' framing of Jin Xing as implicitly homosexual and explicitly 'not homosexual' is the framing of Jin Xing's life as a wife. If the encounter with the

secretary suggests a passive endurance of the man's orgasm, it, at the same time, reveals in Jin's face, to borrow Jagose's words, 'a wifely mask of habituated disappointment'.[56] To describe Jin Xing here as 'wifely' may seem problematic in the context of what is, on the surface at least, an overtly homoerotic scene at a point where Jin is affirming her body and sexuality. I use it, however, to critique the instrumentalist account of the masturbation, which resembles accounts in marital manuals in which 'the husband's and wife's simultaneous orgasms are secured via elaborate and reciprocal systems of bodily and mental management, a regime of training implicit in the notion of adjustment'.[57]

Critical of those whom she sees as role models privileging the heterosexual family (such as chairman Mao's wife Jiang Qing), Jin Xing goes so far as to imagine herself, after her transition, as a heroine of the modern family. One must not forget that the terms *husband*/丈夫, *wife*/妻子, and *mother*/母親 appear frequently in both the English and Chinese versions in reference to Jin Xing at various stages of her life. For example, when she goes to the US embassy, without her then 'wife' to obtain an official document granting the termination of that marriage, Jin confirms the Black woman officer's question 'You divorced your husband, didn't you?' (你跟你的丈夫離婚, 是嗎) with a resounding 'yes'.[58] Thus, the word *husband* has a history in the semantic economy of the text. Interestingly, the account of the divorce is omitted in the English translation, and stress laid instead on Jin becoming a 'mother' and then meeting Hans-Gert, who would eventually become her 'husband'. The English translation thus foregrounds the modern patriarchal family as an essential characteristic, honour or virtue of modernity, which is intimately related to the supposed normalcy of heterosexuality. Central to this project is the text's omission or attenuation of an explicit account of marriage and divorce to frame Jin Xing's story within the emergence of neoliberalism in China. More subtly, however, the neoliberal framing of Jin Xing's transition emerges in the English text's persistent re-framing of trans identity development, transgender sexual desire, transgender consciousness and trans people's struggles against male privilege as issues of privacy, censorship and individual sexual freedom.

What the Anglophone audience misses in the English translation of Jin's pivotal confession before the surgery (Chapter 1 of the English edition) is her reflection on her twenty-eight years of 'good experience' before this.[59] The Chinese text reads:

> 我的生理狀態完全是男人的結構; 可以勃起, 射精, 產生性交的慾望, 但我從來沒有和女人發生過任何關係。我產生性交慾望的對象, 始終是男人。男人進入我的身體, 我能達到一種快感, 而當男人要求我進入他的身體時, 我會產生反感, 馬上會陽痿。我的角色是個女人。這跟同性戀沒有關係, 而且, 完全是一個女人的心理生存在男人的肢體裡面。[60]

Immediately after this, perversely mimicking an orgy and to draw the audience/readers into the fold of another kind of scene altogether, Jin lies down surrounded by an all-male film crew with their cameras, like erections, 'trained on [her]'. The English translation, however, omits the entire passage in which Jin recalls the history of her body up to this point as 'male', her sexual role as a 'woman', her desire to be penetrated by men and disgust at the idea of the opposite, and her final disclaimer that any of this was homosexual, a denial that echoes throughout the Chinese text but is much less salient in the English translation.

In the English translation, the rearticulation of transgender pleasures, and the associations of bodily functions with pleasure, fulfillment or disgust that establish normative definitions of sexual identity and experience, serves the popular narrative of the inextricable entanglement of non-normative subjects with a *homonormative* sex-gender system. The English translation deletes the uneasy references to body parts of a gender-confirming Jin Xing, her trans desires and the animating (im)potency of being a sexual object. As the unusually substantial omission above shows especially clearly, the English translation transforms (if not transitions) a text about transgender identity and the pleasures and pains of transgender desire into a somewhat de-trans-sexualized and

sanitized one for the sensational appetite of Jin's English-speaking audiences in print and on the imagined stage. Their appetite is awakened and fulfilled by the ultimate theatrical gesture directed and manipulated by Jin Xing, shot by Li Xiaoming, gazed upon by the all-male crew in white scrubs, and climaxed by Dr Yang's cry '上台' (*shang tai*, going on stage) which, in a hetero-orgiastic scene, would normally conclude with the 'money shot' central to hard-core, normative pornography. What remains unseen is an anticlimactic close-up of Jin's orgasmic face, which manifests what Elena Basile may call 'the coming undone of the linguistic skins and surfaces'.[61] In the scene, the fiction of the firmly gendered, fully territorialized (the operating table as Jin's territory cum stage) and self-contained subject (the silenced Jin lies down alone) language (Dr Yang's pun of 'climbing onto the operating table' and 'going on the stage') is exposed and left outside of the theatrical frame.

Conclusion

By telling the story, as she sees it, of her place in the world, Jin Xing takes it upon herself not only to contest dominant narratives of gender and sex but also to assert a complex, undecidable distinction between homosexual and trans identities. At the same time, she does not shrink from exploring the complexities and ambiguities of gender identity, sexual desire, and normative social identities, values and beliefs. That being said, a personal story, especially one as complicated and full of twists and turns as Jin's, cannot 'easily be retold or translated into another language unproblematically'.[62] The public narrative embedded in Jin's personal narrative as a trans subject expresses a profound politics of framing non-normative subjects and the entanglement of their narratives on personal and public levels. Translation, however, in the case of *Shanghai Tango*, is perhaps used by the translators and/or editors and publishers to domesticate her trans identity in political and economic terms. In a paradoxical manner, Jin Xing fulfills the very idea of an ideal subject because of the multi-layered marginal experience she represents, especially during her time in the military dance troupe, where the struggles of sexual minorities like Jin Xing's are repressed sexually and culturally. The enfolding of personal and public narratives within a metanarrative of China's transition to neoliberalism produces two rather different readings of Jin Xing's life story, one that reappropriates heteronormative metanarratives, effectively domesticating Jin Xing (as a wife and mother) and another that radically *others* her as a deeply sex symbol. In either case, reading life stories of minority subjects like Jin Xing encourages us to interrogate our preconscious framing of those lives so as to allow for individuals like Jin Xing to have the right to what Baer calls 'a complex personhood'.[63] It also helps us to avoid either appropriating or reframing and marketing such lives in the service of novelty or sensationalism or, in Jin's case, to rehabilitate an Orientalist Shanghai that enclaves and objectifies, for a Western post-colonial perspective, a city of many identities that has been an oasis of experiments and alternative embodiments.

Notes

1 Shih-Ming Li Chang and Lynn E. Frederiksen, *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 77.

2 Susan Stryker, '(De)subjugated Knowledge: An Introduction to Transgender Studies', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 1.

3 Abid Rahman, 'The Oprah of China Just Happens to Be Transgender', *Hollywood Reporter* (11 November 2016), 72.

4 Jin Xing and Catherine Texier, *Shanghai Tango: A Memoir* (London: Atlantic, 2007), under 'Shanghai Tango'.

5 The current published versions of Jin Xing's book also include a 2006 edition半夢: 金星自傳 (*Half Dream: Jin Xing's Autobiography*) in traditional Chinese published by Fem Books in Taiwan, a 2005 French edition *Rien N'arrive Par Hasard,* translated by Stéphane Lévêque and Isabelle Verhaeghen Kegel from Robert Laffont, a 2006 German edition *Shanghai Tango: Mein Leben als Soldat und Taenzerin* from Blanvalet Verlag.

6 Jin Xing with Catherine Texier, *Rien N'arriver Par Hasard* [Nothing Happens by Chance], translated by Stéphane Lévêque and Isabelle Verhaeghen Kegel (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2005).

7 Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (London: Routledge, 2018), 5.

8 Brian James Baer, *Queer Theory and Translation Studies: Language, Politics, Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 166.

9 Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 8.

10 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 3.

11 Gloria Davies and M. E. Davies, 'Jin Xing: China's Transsexual Star of Dance', in *Celebrity in China*, ed. Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffreys (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 170.

12 Albrecht Neubert and Christiane Nord, *Translation as Text* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1992), 59.

13 Neubert and Nord, *Translation as Text*, 60.

14 Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 38.

15 Baer, *Queer Theory and Translation Studies*, 12.

16 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 130.

17 Jin Xing and Catherine Texier, *Shanghai Tango: A Memoir* (London: Atlantic, 2007), 11.

18 My translation of '我雖然出身在中國,可論身世卻是地道的韓國人'. *See*: Jin Xing 金星, *bang meng: jin xing zizhuan*半夢:金星自傳 [*Half Dream: Jin Xing's Autobiography*] (Beijing: Citic Press, 2005), 11.

19 In 2017, the Health Commission of the People's Republic of China 中華人民共和國衛生健康委員會issued the 'Gender Reassignment Technology Management Standards'性別重置技術管理規範 (2017年版) and 'Gender Reassignment Technology Clinical Application Quality Control Indicators' 性別技術重置技術臨床應用質量控制指標 (2017年版) where the former term 變性手術 – as seen in the 2009 version 'Technical Management Standards for Sex Change Surgery (Trial) 變性手術技術管理規範 (試行) – was formally changed to 性別重置手術. It is said to have regulated the clinical application of gender reassignment surgery to ensure the quality and safety of such surgeries.

20 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995), 21.

21 Jin and Texier, *Shanghai Tango*, 91.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Jin Xing, *Half Dream*, 89. The translation is my own.

25 Said, *Orientalism*, 176.

26 Davies and Davies, 'Jin Xing', 172.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 José Santaemilia, 'Sexuality and Translation as Intimate Partners? Toward a Queer Turn in Rewriting Identities and Desires', in *Queering translation, Translating the Queer*:

Theory, Practice, Activism, ed. Brian James Baer and Klaus Kindi (New York: Routledge, 2018), 20.

30 Santaemilia, 'Sexuality and Translation', 16.

31 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 166.

32 Ibid., 25.

33 Jin and Texier, *Shanghai Tango*, 3.

34 Ibid.

35 Howard Chiang, *After Eunuchs: Science, Medicine, and the Transformation of Sex in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 55.

36 Literal translation by myself: Mother sheds tears when she sent me off. She is looking at her son for the last time. The next time she sees me, I will be her daughter. Mother lays against the wall by the door and cries for an extended time. Her feeling is complicated, and she has endured so much pain for me. However, my mother is strong, she will not talk about/complain about it but she shows her support and it takes her time to take in. … On the way to the Perfumed Hills Hospital, I shed tears. I feel that my mother has borne too much burden for me; another reason is that I am about to say goodbye to my male body; at the same time, I am grateful for my male body for giving me twenty-eight years of good experience.

37 Jin and Texier, *Shanghai Tango*, 4.

38 Ibid., 25.

39 Ibid., 6.

40 Emily Rose, *Translating Trans Identity: (Re)Writing Undecidable Texts and Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3.

41 Annamarie Jagose, *Orgasmology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 132.

42 Once a colleague of my mother who was worker at a weaving factory invited me and my mother to their [her in the Chinese text] countryside. I went with my mother and (we) stayed in the country for one night. The female worker had an older brother in his early twenties. He was very handsome and had a full beard. I called him *Jiu Jiu* [maternal uncle]. At night, I naturally shared the bed with 'Jiu Jiu'. I was truly blessed to be lying next to such a handsome man. I also had a strange psychology. When I smelled the scent of a man, I felt that was what I needed and what I liked. Therefore, whenever my mother said that she would go to Jiu Jiu's house, I felt happier than anything else, and wanted to get close to him. [My literal translation, see Jin Xing, *Half Dream*, 10.]

43 Jin and Texier, *Shanghai Tango*, 10.

44 Mark Graham, *Anthropological Explorations in Queer Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2107), 55.

45 Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl, 'Introduction: Queer(ing) Translation', in *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer: Theory, Practice, Activism*, ed. Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl (New York: Routledge, 2018), 7.

46 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 162.

47 Literal translation by myself.

48 Baer and Kaindl, 'Introduction', 5.

49 Jin and Texier, *Shanghai Tango*, 121.

50 Santaemilia, 'Sexuality and Translation', 12.

51 Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 131.

52 Jin Xing, *Half Dream*, 23.

53 Jin and Texier, *Shanghai Tango*, 24.

54 Ibid., 25.

55 Ibid., 24.

56 Jagose, *Orgasmology*, 98.

57 Ibid., 58.

58 Jin Xing, *Half Dream*, 174.

59 Jin and Texier, *Shanghai Tango*, 154.

60 My literal translation: My physiology is completely male; I can have an erection, can ejaculate and have desire for intercourse, but I've never done anything sexual with women. The object of my sexual desire is always a man. When a man enters my body, it gives me pleasure. But when a man asks me to enter his body, I feel disgusted and immediately become impotent. My role is that of a woman. This has nothing to do with homosexuality; it is entirely a woman's psychological existence in a man's body. See: Jin Xing, *Half Dream*, 154–5.

61 Elena Basile, 'A Scene of Intimate Entanglements, or, Reckoning with the "Fuck" of Translation', in *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer Theory, Practice, Activism*, ed. Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl (New York: Routledge, 2018), 28.

62 Baker, *Translation and Conflict*, 28.

63 Baer, *Queer theory and Translation Studies*, 165.

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Part II

QUEER WOMEN'S SPACES

Chapter 4

Female Same-Sex Love in the Chinese Enlightenment: Lesbian Fiction by Three Women Writers, 1923–8

Yixin Liu

Among Republican Chinese writers who touched upon the theme of female same-sex love in fictional works, Lu Yin 庐隐 (1898–1934), Ling Shuhua 凌叔华 (1900–90) and Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–86) were women writers. They wrote 'Lishi's diaries' (*Lishi de riji* 丽石的日记, 1923), 'Old friends on the seaside' (*Haibin guren* 海滨故人, 1923), 'There is such a thing' (*Shuo you zheme yihui shi* 说有那么一回事, 1926) and 'During summer vacation' (*Shujia zhong* 暑假中, 1928). These four fictional works appeared in the first decade after the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which was denominated by Vera Schwarcz as 'the Chinese Enlightenment'.[1]

The collective emergence of lesbian-themed fiction was not accidental. In addition to female authors, the majority of male writers' lesbian-themed fictional works, such as Ye Shaojun 叶圣陶's 'Being forgotten' (*Bei wangque de* 被忘却的, 1922), Zhang Yiping (章衣萍)'s 'Love letters' (*Qingshu yishu* 情书一束, 1926) and Zhang Ziping (张资平)'s 'Flying catkins' (*Feixu* 飞絮, 1926), were published in this decade.[2] The rise and fall of lesbian-themed fiction were a reflection of the climax and decline of the May Fourth enlightenment zeitgeist.

If we look at the May Fourth Movement, we will find that the shaping of *xin nüxing* 新女性 (new woman) is mainly advocated and promoted by male intellectuals, aiming to realize the modern transformation of Chinese society. The many predicaments encountered by new women highlight the contradiction between personal liberation and transformation of social systems, as well as the conflict between women's liberation and social movements based on the patriarchal pattern. Extending the Chinese Communist Party's decision to unify women's liberation into class and social liberation, women have always obtained limited liberation within the framework in which male-dominated rule would not be affected. In this way, the lesbian discourse can be considered as a crucial breakthrough for women's liberation. In this situation, they completely avoid males' engagement, not only spiritually but also physically. The emergence of lesbian-themed fiction highlights a further enlightenment of Republican Chinese women. However, it was a pity that the proceeding was intervened by some internal and external factors and eventually went silent.

Overall, this chapter emphasizes how educated Republican Chinese women actively deployed and appropriated ideas from the West in their literary practice about lesbian discourse in their pursuit of national enlightenment. This exhibits not only a response of the women's liberation but also a strategy to awaken the female consciousness. I argue that the camouflaged stance on lesbianism, or as Tze-lan Sang says, the weak presentation of the real lesbianism,[3] is not only a balance mechanism between ideological liberation and bodily desire that modern Chinese women endeavoured to seek but also an alternative exploration of the legitimacy of emotional expression in gender relations.

The dilemma of 'new woman' and the predicament of the lesbian discourse

Before the Republican era, the word *aiqing* 爱情 (love) did not exist, and neither did the expression of 'female same-sex love' or 'lesbianism'. In 1923, the editor Zhang Xichen 章锡琛 published an article in *Funü zazhi* 妇女杂志 (Ladies' journal), in which he described how the Western notion of 'love' was translated and re-introduced in the Chinese language and cultural context.[4] The dissemination of this notion affected the way Chinese people dealt with humans' emotional bonding and treated the marital issue. Interestingly, the majority of Chinese people could still not completely understand this notion and even regarded it as the concept of *jianyin* 奸淫 (lewdness). Therefore, the birth of the concept of 'love' in the Chinese context included the physical and sexual implication, which is why I use the term 'female same-sex love' in this study. Lesbianism was originally linked with the European sexual science, and it acquired a sexual identity.[5] Before Zhang Xichen's article appeared, many intellectuals and critics had published articles that not only introduced the Western knowledge about love and marriage between a man and a woman but also expressed their own ideas about this notion.[6]

The appearance of the notion of *tongxing ai* 同性爱 (same-sex love) in the Chinese context can be traced back to a translated monograph published in 1911, and it was used to describe the love between women.[7] Until the late 1910s, while the *Xin wenhua yundong* 新文化运动 (New Culture Movement) was in progress, the more specific concept of lesbianism, *funü tongxing ai* 妇女同性爱 (female same-sex love), was disseminated in the public sphere.

This movement was a revolution that foregrounded new trends of thought. Since the late Qing Dynasty, the discourses of democracy and technology had been infiltrating from the West. In the late nineteenth century, some intellectuals started to confront the corruption of the empire and advocated the combination of Western and Chinese cultures. At the same time, however, they also faced a dilemma regarding the extent of the change and reform. Many intellectuals engaged in intense arguments about which traditional cultures should change and which should be preserved.

Under the current social climate, the issue of Chinese women's liberation is naturally seen as a part of historical progress. The emergence of female writers in China in the early decades of the twentieth century 'marked a significant stage in the emancipation of Chinese women'.[8] They realized the difficulties that 'entrapped them within past paradigms',[9] expressed their solicitude and concern for females in Chinese society and contributed to the phenomenon of 'new woman', which was contrary to the stereotypes of the 'traditional' Chinese woman.[10] In this process, the notion of 'new woman' came into being. In the New Culture Movement, the term 'new woman' revealed 'the unique alchemy of gender and modernity in early twentieth-century China',[11] and it emphasized the 'newness' and 'modernity' of female figures.

Although female intellectuals played crucial roles in the promotion of 'new woman', the shaping of this concept was originally advocated by male intellectuals, and it was not a production that was exactly based on the feminist discourse. This is also the distinction between the discourse of Chinese lesbianism and that of the West.

Holding an important position in the May Fourth enlightenment, the journal *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (New youth) started publishing a column on 'Nüzi wenti' 女子问题 (Women's issues) in 1916. Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, Hu Shi 胡适, Lu Xun 鲁迅, Wu Yu 吴虞 and the other so-called mainstream intellectuals wrote various articles, criticizing *fu wei qi gang* 夫为妻纲 (the husband is the guide for the wife), *sancong side* 三从四德 (three obediences and four virtues) and other old feudal morals that had caused women's dependent status. For instance, in Wu Yu's article, 'Nüquan pingyi' 女权平议 (Equal discussion on women's rights),[12] he discussed topics ranging from the advocacy of women's rights by European enlightenment thinkers to women's specific rights to education equality and legal and administrative rights in the United States, showing the development of European and

American rights to the Chinese, and stating that China should carry out *nüquan geming* 女权革命 (revolution of women's rights).[13] At the end of the article, Wu Yu clarified that intellectuals advocated women's rights in the hope that Chinese women would 'struggle with men for nationalism and follow women in today's Anglo-German society, instead of competing with politicians and parliamentarians who are now disregarding the state, and their gains and losses will be at one time'.[14] In addition to being referred to as specific gender groups, in the minds of enlightened intellectuals, women represented the image of China that had been impoverished, weak, and oppressed by foreign powers since the late Qing Dynasty. Their true purpose was to transform Chinese society. In this process, regardless of how female writers fought for women's rights, they could not shake the male-centred world, since men would still be involved.

The emergence of the lesbian discourse in the May Fourth enlightenment era brought about a change in the situation. In fact, although the concept of 'same-sex love' did not appear in the public sphere until the Republican era, writing about homosexuality had a long history in ancient Chinese literature, among which writings about gay men were the majority, while content about lesbians just accidentally appeared in male writers' depictions[15]; they were described as insignificant and ridiculous. This disparagement of lesbianism reveals that it had not become the main source of males' anxiety.[16]

In the May Fourth era, along with the dissemination of Western ideals, homosexuality was endowed with public existence, and lesbianism was included in public discussion for the first time, even though it was considered as abnormal, perverted and hazardous by mainstream male critics. At the same time, intellectuals with acute consciousness started paying attention to the issue of same-sex love, and the literary discourses they created resulted in more public attention being paid to the women-loving-women practice/phenomenon than to male homosexuality. Unlike male intellectuals, who censured lesbianism, female authors tend to reveal the collective dilemma of existential status and somehow use lesbian discourse as a more powerful weapon in the course of women's liberation.

Camouflaged lesbianism in the May Fourth enlightenment era

It could be said that 'Lishi's diaries' was the first lesbian short story in the May Fourth literature. It was originally published by *Xiaoshuo yuebao* in 1923 and comprises sixteen diaries written by Lishi丽石, a female student, before she died. From the first few diaries, we know that Lishi is dissatisfied with the monotony of school life, and with her hypocritical male teacher, and she feels upset about the miserable married life of a friend of her. She gradually intensely repels the opposite gender and finds herself unwilling to get close to men.[17] Lishi has a girlfriend, Yuanqing 沅青, with whom she enjoys romantic love, and they plan to live together, and even to marry in the future. Lishi expresses her intense love to Yuanqing in the diary by writing that she was born for Yuanqing rather than for herself. Moreover, Lishi explicitly clarifies that 'thus we two have become same-sex lovers instead of mere friends'.[18]

Subsequently, Lishi and Yunqing submerge themselves in the world of imagining their idyllic future life.[19] As if they are far away from social conventions and institutions and locating themselves in a hermitage, their dream is symbolic and prophetic with imagery that particularly indicates female sexual arousal. In Chinese ancient stories, there were similar scenes in *xingmeng* 性梦 (sexual dream) for the indications of sexual desire.[20] Tze-lan Sang specifies that the imagery such as rowing a boat in water, a bush of reeds and others suggests 'exploration of female erogenous zones'.[21] As a result, their bodily desire exists in a veritable fairyland rather than in reality, although it seems to be a rupture with

sex violating the consistency of body and soul, which accordingly creates 'plastic sexuality' with physical self-sufficient identity.[22]

However, Yuanqing's parents eventually oppose the love between Lishi and Yuanqing, and Yuanqing's mother wants her to go to Tianjin to attend a relative's wedding. After Yuanqing leaves, Lishi pines away since she becomes lovesick. Several days later, Yuanqing calls Lishi and asks her to come back. 'Today I (Lishi) received Yuanqing's telephone call and she will arrive tonight. Oh, my heart is relieved now, and then I must instruct servants to cook.'[23] When Lishi arrives at the train station to pick up Yuanqing, she finds that she still has an hour to wait before the train arrives. Lishi runs straight towards Yuanqing as soon as she sees her again and starts to wail that life is too much for her, and this is the very last time they meet each other. Yuanqing is then forced again by her mother to move to Tianjin and to date her cousin prior to their marriage.[24] Before her departure, Yuanqing writes to Lishi:

> … And we have to break up now … Ah, Lishi! Why didn't you plan ahead! Why didn't you dress up in men's clothes, put on a man's hat, act like a man, and visit my parents to ask for my hand? Now they know you're a woman, and they would not let you marry me. They have found a 'capable youth' for me![25]

What Yuanqing says reveals that homosexuality cannot be accepted by society unless it is camouflaged with heterosexuality. In other words, women usually failed to subvert conventional gender orders in the process of deconstructing a two-sex-based relationship with self-consciousness. Attitudes towards the 'Other' would not be prepared to break through the dualistic ethical imperative within traditional morality, as it would destroy Confucian kinship structures and separate spheres of gender and would infringe on a series of ethical ideologies. Those who were opposed to heterosexual culture and were identified as 'abnormal' should be at the same stage.[26] A few weeks later, Yuanqing is compelled to marry her cousin and Lishi loses the will to live and soon dies of melancholia.

In the story, the neologism *tongxing de ailian* 同性的爱恋 (same-sex romantic love) used to indicate Lishi's awareness of the concept of homosexuality and lesbian desire achieves symbolic visibility in her dream to reveal how lesbians envision their marriage with men. Even though Lu Yin apparently advocated spirituality in lesbian love,[27] she has nonetheless conveyed her idea of inter-attraction between female bodies as well, and she sought a reasonable existence for sexual desire in lesbian relationships. Lu Yin closely combined lesbian spirituality and lesbian corporeality.

In this story, Yuanqing plays a role with personal anxiety and is inscribed with exterior impacts. Although she realizes her sexuality, she is still able to act as a woman at the end. Her mother repeatedly emphasizes that she is supposed to marry a man rather than a woman. Compared with Lishi, Yuanqing receives more limitation and instigation in terms of what to do and how to act as a female being. Therefore, even though Yuanqing admits her love for Lishi she does not totally exclude the opposite sex and even accuses Lishi of being a woman rather than a man. Eventually, she writes a letter to Lishi and advises her to abandon lesbian love, stating that 'Lishi, our previous thoughts are indeed juvenile and immature. The same-sex love eventually cannot be accepted by the public and I hope you can come to your senses and correct your mistake!'[28] Yuanqing eventually reaffirms the heterosexual ethics. Conversely, without too much family interference, Lishi claims her exhaustive disavowal of heterosexuality. To comfort Lishi, Yuanqing introduces another male youth, Liwen, to her, which annoys Lishi very much. She expresses her deep resignation about it, 'How could Yuanqing do this to me?', and feels she is being insulted by her pure love. In the final diary, Lishi asks, 'Why doesn't God treat human beings equally when creating us and why does there exist a difference between men and women?'[29] That Lishi's love for Yuanqing does not transform with the involvement of the opposite sex reveals that most real lesbians avoid men and 'there is a feeling of resentment'.[30] Lu Yin always

emphasized that ‘they (women) must be not merely women but also people’,[31] and believed that the difference between men and women would only be based on the person rather than on two-gender characteristics.

It seems that Lishi’s death was caused by the departure of Yuanqing, but deeper than that, it is an inevitable result of the encounter with her own same-sex desire. The text suggests that she became ill as soon as she learned that Yuanqing was going away to meet her cousin, but the catalyst for her deterioration came from two things that Yuanqing did for her. First, Yuanqing wrote to persuade her to come to her senses. In this way, Yuanqing moves from being Lishi’s partner in building their mutual ideal life to becoming an agent of the heterosexual logics and social ‘normal’ mechanism, so that her words are a performance for an implicit audience, both the social public, who are watching them closely, and Lishi’s inner self, who desires the same sex. Therefore, it is clear that the fundamental cause of Lishi’s death is the discovery of her same-sex desire and the fear that comes from that discovery. It is the discovery that forces her to face the truth that in the ideal spiritual life she hopes for, she has been concealing another self that desires a same-sex partner, which not only goes against her idea of progress and making a difference, but also deprives her of the moral legitimacy of her quest for an ideal life.

Compared with ‘Lishi’s Diaries’ that directly touches upon the lesbian theme without reservation, ‘Old Friends on the Seashore’ narrates the homosexual romance in a much more implicit way. Some mainland Chinese scholars, such as Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua,[32] endeavour to demonstrate how the story does not focus on homosexuality but reveals the specific female friendship in the story. However, the controversy itself reveals that the narrative does not accord with the usual narration about female friendship. The female relationships threaten the existence of heterosexuality in reality; the narrative seems to deploy of underprivileged anti-hegemonic aesthetics. I find that this kind of camouflaged ‘same-sex love’ somehow conveys Lu Yin’s personal implicit and circuitous attitude towards lesbianism against the enlightenment dilemma that new women confronted in reality.[33] Lishi’s death results from the real lesbian desire confronted with the heterosexual marriage system. As Lu Yin has clearly realized women’s tragedy when practising lesbianism, she attempts to change another way as a measure against women’s dilemma in the May Fourth enlightenment era.

This short story, or rather novelette, ‘Haibin guren’,[34] is Lu Yin’s most well-known literary work, in which there are five female companions who are teacher training college classmates: Lusha 露莎, Lingyu 玲玉, Yunqing 云清, Zongying 宗莹 and Lianshang 莲裳. The protagonist, Lusha, is the most extrovert person of them all and actually bears some of Lu Yin’s personality traits as well as sharing her family background. In addition, she always spends holidays with friends and they meet at a seaside hotel. Regarding the other four girls, Lingyu is emotional and meticulous while Yunqing is more rational, and therefore they are quite close. Lianshang seems popular, and Zongying is a pretty girl but is very mean to others. They take lectures together, play games together, chat together and always hold hands to sing songs after class. Sometimes they ‘sit around the stove in a room and talk about everything without disguise’ and at night they ‘put their beds together’ and chat all the time.[35] These five girls are together from morning to night.

We see that the five girls in the story formed close and mutually supportive relationships regarding their emotions and lives during their college years, and they each have career aspirations for the future. As they start to transition from adolescence to maturity, their troubles arise in the face of the advances or temptations of men. On the surface, although the text does not portray their interaction as homosexual on a conscious level, the friend in the relationship, which is considered a transitional stage in mainstream society, becomes one of their most lingering feelings in the face of men, even after getting married. The happy times they spend together and their emotional satisfaction not only fulfil the pursuit of their ideal life, but also, and more importantly, they feel safe in them, completely free from the anxiety of facing heterosexual love or marriage. In the text, the author weaves

together the emotional journeys they each experience in the form of a narrative interspersed with numerous letters and conversations. This intricate structure serves to interfere with or delay the development of the narrative in time; however, it also allows the indicative impulse of the writing to remain in the memories of what Yunqing in the story calls about ‘same-sex love’.

The five girls have modern progressive ideas and consciously departed from the traditional female position of ‘the husband is the guide for the wife’, which partly explains why they are always in a conflict when facing *qing* 情 (feeling) and *zhi* 智 (reason): they clearly realize that heterosexual marriage has always been closely connected with conventional phallocentric morality, and what awaits them in the end is the abandonment of the ideal of self. At the same time, although education gives women the advantage of advancement in the cultural hierarchy, it also becomes a criterion for women’s self-perfection. In other words, women must always measure whether their words and actions comply with the moral order of the sovereign to avoid slipping down the hierarchy of cultural superiority.[36]

Thus, while the pursuit of same-sex emotional development was an option for the pursuit of an ideal spiritual life, it involved a very important issue, namely, the possibility that it would touch on the external taboo of homosexuality in society, which would directly threaten the ‘progress’ for young intellectual women. This factor acts as an implicit fear that makes them either grieve, despise themselves or force themselves not to fulfil or deny their desire for the same sex in the face of the loss of a lover or companion.

The strategy that Lu Yin adopts is to oppose the unfeeling, irrational feudal laws of social decorum within the women’s community where *qing* exists in harmony with *zhi*. In a sense, the supportive emotional bonding between women is also a female alliance for rebelling against androcentrism and makes men incapable of being involved in it. Lu Yin’s texts reconstruct female-female relationships by excluding men and expressing women’s antipathy towards men, which is a rejection of male desires by denying women’s own desires. Men were placed in a dilemma of sexual anxiety and experienced a kind of spiritual castration.

Lu Yin does not describe voluptuous women’s bodies and provide vivid sexual descriptions, Lu Yin’s stance on camouflaged lesbianism is not only a balance mechanism of ideological liberation and sexual desire for modern Chinese women, but also an exploration of the legitimacy of emotional expression in gender relations. Furthermore, the way she responds to the issue of homosexuality enables her to place her female protagonists in a societal vacuum in which females are able to thoroughly examine their own emotional statuses.

Secret deployment and alternative transcendence of lesbian discourse

If Lu Yin’s depiction of homosexual love is an idealistic approach to female self-realization, Ling Shuhua’s work in 1926 and Ding Ling’s work in 1928 are a realistic portrayal of the romantic relationship of enlightened female intellectuals, expressing the authors’ deep sympathy for their tragic consequence. Both deploy the discourse of lesbianism in a way that is different from Lu Yin’s narrative strategy. In contrast to the utopian community that Lu Yin constructed in the story, Ling Shuhua and Ding Ling combined more realistic implications based on social reality and revolutionary transformations.

Ling Shuhua’s fictional work ‘There Is Such a Thing’ not only depicts the two schoolgirls, Yingman 影曼 and Yunluo 云罗, as Romeo and Juliet but also boldly depicts the expression of sexual desire between the same sex. In this aspect, the queer subjectivity that the protagonists had acquired is deeper than that of Lu Yin’s protagonists. For instance, when Yingman and Yunluo are lying together, this thought comes into Yingman’s mind:

> Looking at her open breasts to reveal her pink jade-like chest, and looking down the large collar, I could see the curve of the soft, slightly convex breasts … a sweet, intoxicating scent of powder, hair or flesh was coming from the tent at times … lay under a warm blanket, her head resting on a pair of warm arms, a pair of hands around her waist, and suddenly she felt a comfort she had never felt before and could not describe. The two of them are in the same boat.[37]

This fictional work is written in the third person, and the omniscient narrator exists outside the events of the story; at the same time, the third-person narration enables the author to distance herself from the narration to avoid being accused. In the title 'There Is Such a Thing', we see in the author's attitude towards the story that she seems like an outsider. Furthermore, Ling Shuhua published this story under the pseudonym Suxin 素心 in the periodical *Chenbao fukan* 晨报副刊 (Supplement of morning news). In the story, there are many depictions of the character's erotic attraction to the same sex. When comparing this fictional work with Lu Yin's 'Lishi de riji', although both present the interaction of two lesbians, the erotic expression between protagonists Yingman and Yunluo is to some extent more like searching for the middle ground. Yingman is like a Mulan-style woman disguised as a man when she is with Yunluo.[38] She always adopts masculine and patriarchal moods and behaviours towards Yunluo in the daily interaction. The sort of virtual relationship seems like a substitute for heterosexuality and a comformity to the conventional gender order. In this way, the interaction between Lishi and Yuanqing is more equal. Some feminists propose that the stance of real lesbians should first be the feminist stance against patriarchy, while the heterosexualism is a repressive gender politics.[39]

However, in the end, the two characters' homosexual relationship is also unsustainable due to the demands of their feudal families. One day, Yunluo tells Yingman in tears that her mother wants her to go home to go on a blind date. Yingman hopes that Yunluo will not go, and she asks Yun Luo to marry her. The two of them will be together for life, just like the two female teachers at school. Yunluo knows that she must obey her mother, and she has neither the courage to commit to Yingman nor the courage to reject her completely. Although it was supposed to be a short home visit, Yunluo's return is delayed again and again, and Yingman blames the war in Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces for her delayed return. Eventually, she overhears her classmates discussing Yunluo's situation and hears the news that she is getting married. She then faints; while in delirium, she seems to see Yunluo, but she cannot ascertain whether she is calling for help or smiling.

In Yang Zhensheng's 'Why Did She Become Lunatic Suddenly',[40] the original version of 'There Is Such a Thing', the theme focuses on the opposition to arranged marriage; the love between two girls cannot be understood by other people, and people around are also puzzled by the cause of Yingman's lunacy. The author provides a shallow judgement of their love of the same sex. However, in the rewritten 'There Is Such a Thing', the female author adds a detailed description of the interaction and communication of the two girls in the drama rehearsal, which makes the process of falling in love of the two girls more reasonable. Her description of classmates is more in line with them; for example, Yunluo's roommate has a tacit understanding of their love and adopts an attitude of approval. In Ling Shuhua's fictional work, the surrounding students seem to understand the two girls' romantic relationship and gradually become their supporters and helpers, which is different from Yang's version. Moreover, the narrative implies that in addition to Yingman and Yunluo, many students in the school have same-sex love. For example, Yingman says to Yunluo: 'You see, the elementary school teacher Chen Wanzhen, has been living with Miss Chu for five or six years, right? Can't we both learn from them? You don't have to think with one way. I think I love you more deeply and longer than any other males. You're supposed to understand, right? Can't you marry me?'[41]

It is particularly surprising that Romeo can serve as a role model for lesbian marriage. The fact that two female teachers who were long-term partners lived together in a school

does not seem unusual and has not been publicly condemned. Yunluo's going away from Yingman was mainly based on the pressure from Yunluo's family, and most importantly, Yunluo does not cut herself off from her parents for the sake of Yingman. However, the narrative leaves out what happens after Yunluo arrives at home.

Compared with Yang Zhensheng in the writing, Ling Shuhua does not merely attribute to the tragic ending of the two girls to the arranged marriage; instead, she ascribes it to the joint contribution of multiple complex factors that they face in reality, such as the struggle between love and domestic affection, the unhappiness due to women being unable to live independently, and scruples about reputation. It reflects a female author's comprehensive thinking in terms of solving women's problems based on the female experience and achieving actual liberation only through self-transformation.

Another female writer, Ding Ling, represents the same-sex love between female young teachers instead of students in the short story 'During Summer Vacation'. The main protagonists are two lesbian couples, Jiaying 嘉瑛 and Chengshu 承淑, as well as Dezhen 德珍 and Chunzhi 春芝. All of them teach at 'Zili nüxiao' 自立女校 (Self-reliance girls' school) in a small rural town. The intimacy between them is obvious. In the letter Chunzhi wrote to Dezhen, Dezhen signed her name as 'the first person you kissed'. We also learn from Zhiqing (志清)'s observation that Jiaying and Chengshu 'were so involved in kissing and cuddling all day long' that they 'learned all those unseemly things', suggesting that they may have been in a close physical relationship for a long time. Even when they ask the other person to be faithful to the relationship, they are clearly saying 'love me', 'I want you to love me'. Additionally, the relationship is exclusive, never allowing a third person to intervene. The whole story employs the changing relationship between Jiaying and Chengshu as the main thread, and the narrative can be divided into three parts. The first part is marked by Jiaying's departure, which strains her relationship with Chengshu; however, Jiaying's staying behind eases this tension and oppression to some extent. The second part is their elaborate preparations for and performance at the parade, which again solidifies their intimacy; however, Dezhen's wedding deals a blow to this intimacy and makes it seem precarious. The third part is Jiaying once again decides to leave for good, and she seems to end her relationship with Chengshu, with Zhiqing's relationship with Chengshu replacing her own.

These women originally vowed to remain single rather than to marry men and become housewives and to dedicate themselves to a career in education. The main reason for this is that they were fascinated by the notion of female emancipation preached by the intellectual elite in the cities that led the way. The author does not locate protagonists in a utopia; rather, the girls are facing society. What Ding Ling examines in this fictional work is the possible ways out after 'Nora's leaving'.

In the second section, Chengshu and Zhiqing are discussing the ideal of remaining single.[42] Zhiqing laughs not only at her classmates who rush to marry as soon as they are old enough but also at the false celibacy of not marrying but having heterosexual-like relationships with female partners. Zhiqing is proud of herself since she 'sees nothing, and all feelings are ridiculous'. However, Zhiqing also has her own personal dilemma: to maintain her celibacy, she has to be completely financially independent, so she has to earn a meagre salary, secretly saves money, and finagles her debts to generate interest, always being remarked upon for her stinginess. The situation of the runaway Nora in the 1920s has already been presented in full in this short excerpt. In Ding Ling's writing, therefore, the writing about female same-sex love is a pessimistic representation. She finds it unlikely that an ideal female alliance could be maintained in a male-dominated world. In a gender-unequal society, there are few women who can resist the benefits of the material symbols conferred by heterosexual marriage.

In the story, even though they are in love, they are often at odds, as all couples in love are. Some will eventually break away, and those who remain in the relationship have different plans and ideas for their future lives. Dezhen leaves the girls' school and embarks

on a heterosexual marriage, regardless of how much Chunzhi complains and cries. After Dezhen's marriage, the faculty dormitory becomes extraordinarily dull. Jiaying is even more reluctant to go through school life and often goes to play cards at other colleagues' houses; she becomes very bored with Chengshu's displays of affection and longs for true and passionate love. In the light of Dezhen's happiness, Chengshu looks back on a bitter past and faces a dim future while questioning the value of enlightenment: 'Wasn't it better to waste one's life ignorantly, toiling away at simple, stupid things that didn't require thought, than to live now in this lonely old temple?'[43] These two lonely people in the dormitory, Chengshu and Zhiqing, gradually come together, and this leads to a misunderstanding on Jiaying's part.

Having witnessed the growing relationship between Chengshu and Zhiqing, Jiaying becomes jealous and intends to go home, but the headmaster finally persuades her to stay. Out of kindness, Dezhen wants to introduce Brother Mingzi's colleague, Tuozi 驼子, to Jiaying as a potential boyfriend, but Jiaying is not satisfied with him and has rejected him. Every time Jiaying thinks of Tuozi, she feels disgusted by his 'cumbersome and vile appearance'. She begins to imagine an ideal partner by describing the age and character of the ideal type and devises 'a lovely big brother' for herself; however, when she realizes that this was a fantasy, she thinks of her cousins in the provincial capital and the popular image of the ideal partner generated by reading 'popular romance novels'. Jiaying's ideal type should not only be a young man of a similar age and with a similar temperament but also dress in a new style, have a superior family background, be well-educated, know about romantic love, and belong to a group of youths who appear lively, smart, good-looking and witty. Moreover, Jiaying even imagines the specific scene in romantic love. Here, the author employs a passage of free indirect discourse to describe the scene:

> In the sunlight, under the moon, under the stars, we all sat around and listened to the wind blowing off the fallen leaves, to the babbling of the water at the head of the stream, to the singing of the birds and the wings of the butterflies on the soft leaves, thus they told her magical stories and sang beautiful poems, and she played the lute for them. She also played the lute for them …[44]

Through the depiction, we see that Jiaying had a clear cognition of heterosexual and homosexual love, so loving Chengshu was supposed to be her active choice rather than due to the ignorance of love. It was not a temporary substitute for heterosexual love. At the same time, however, we can appreciate the complexity of the emotional journey of new women in Republican China. Although they were aware of their homosexuality, they often revealed their indecision in their final choice. For them, it was linked with the enlightenment of society and with the extent of their own enlightenment regarding themselves.

At the end of the short story, Jiaying, who feels lonely at school, decides to return to her hometown again, while Zhiqing plans to continue her education. However, as the headmaster has given them the job of enrolling students, they become busy with the lessons they have to teach and put their respective plans aside. Jiaying's two unsuccessful attempts to run away lead to the main threads of change that appear at the beginning and end of the novel, which not only forms a circular narrative but also includes another linear structure of the deteriorating relationship between Jiaying and Chengshu.

Ding Ling's satire on lesbian love, like her satire on heterosexual love, is an individual reflection on the discourse of romantic love. She constantly seeks a greater faith than romantic love, especially in the social situation after the 1927 White Terror[45]; this tendency can be clearly perceived in 'During Summer Vacation'. As the enlightened, she was aware of the crippling spirit of enlightenment and put her thoughts about lesbianism into introspection towards the path of social revolution. Perhaps for these reasons, she later turned explicitly to socialism, hoping to achieve a kind of overall social restructuring.[46]

Conclusion

'Female same-sex love' is a particular landscape in the May Fourth women's literature. It is a manifestation of the special mentality of women who have just embarked on the path to enlightenment and liberation. It is also a criticism of the unreasonable society that suppresses women in both practical and spiritual terms. Regardless of their attitudes towards female homosexuality, the three female writers, Lu Yin, Ling Shuhua and Ding Ling, have actively explored the possibilities of female identity and relationships beyond modern marriage and heterosexuality. Additionally, they have been involved in the discussion and negotiation of gender and sexuality norms during the Chinese enlightenment period.

Through this chapter, we see that the rise and fall of lesbian-themed fiction were also a reflection of the climax and decline of the May Fourth enlightenment zeitgeist. As a matter of fact, the proceeding of Chinese enlightenment gradually regressed after the May Fourth Movement. From being despised to being condemned, the discourse about lesbianism received more attention in the May Fourth era. Unfortunately, it almost disappeared after the first decade of the 1919 May Fourth movement. One of the reasons is that lesbians had received too much criticism, mainly from mainstream intellectuals. However, this demonstrates that it indeed triggered collective anxiety and shook the patriarchal cultural context. The May Fourth movement of 1919 pushed forward the enlightenment spirits to reach their peak and remain there for several years.[47] During this process, the agenda for women's liberation was influenced, and the voice of real lesbianism finally emerged.

Three Republican Chinese women writers actively deployed and appropriated ideas from the West in their literary practice about lesbian discourse in their pursuit of national enlightenment, which exhibits not only a response of the women's liberation but also a strategy to awaken the female consciousness. Their camouflaged stance on lesbianism, or as Tze-lan Sang says, the weak presentation of the real lesbianism, is not only a balance mechanism between ideological liberation and bodily desire that modern Chinese women have endeavoured to seek but also an alternative exploration of the legitimacy of emotional expression in gender relations.

Notes

1 'Enlightenment' was one of May Fourth keywords. But after May Fourth movement of 1919, Chinese advocates of enlightenment were gradually forced to reconsider, even to abandon their vision of intellectual emancipation. Cf. Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986), 9.

2 I do not include male writers' literary works in the core discussion; the main for this is that despite sharing the same lesbian theme, their creative writing does not have a similar spiritual advocacy to women's writing. As Tze-lan Sang argues, male writers' lesbian fiction expresses anxiety about women's orgasms and even reveals a sort of voyeurism and sexual fantasy to satisfy male readers. Although their original purpose might have been joining the discussion about same-sex desire, the final result was creating more anxiety. Cf. Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 25.

3 Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 22.

4 In the article, Zhang Xichen demonstrates: 'About the word of "love", there had never been this concept in China, even no this noun. Recently it could be reluctantly translated it with *lian'ai*恋爱, but the real concept still does not exist, thus many people consider it as the same meaning of "lewdness" (*jianyin* 奸淫). That's the biggest reason

why ordinary people are still against conducting love (*tan lian'ai*谈恋爱). Of course it should not weird, because in Chinese books, histories, ethics, habits, laws and regulations, there had never been the so-called *lian'ai*.' Cf. Zhang Xichen章锡琛, 'Bianji de xin' 编辑的信 [The editor's letter], *Funü zazhi*妇女杂志 [Ladies' journal] 8, no. 9 (1923): 23.

5 Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 25.

6 Haiyan Lee also presented an explicit argument about the discourse of love in the May Fourth enlightenment era. Cf. Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

7 See, 'Ruhe huode nüzi de aiqing' 如何获得女子的爱情 [How to acquire a woman's love], in *Shenghuo zhenyan* 生活箴言 [Maxism of life], trans. Feng Hong冯洪 (Shanghai: Tianxia shudian, 1911), 72. The original author's name was missed. In the article, the author mentions that the first thing that became popular in school life was the term 'same-sex love' (*Tongxing ai*同性爱), and then love for the opposite sex became rotten and natural. What Tze-lan Sang mentions about Shanzai's article '*Funü tongxing zhi aiqing'* was actually published in 1912 instead of 1911. Cf. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 117.

8 Feng Jin, *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004), 126.

9 Wendy Larson, *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 132.

10 Ibid.

11 Feng Jin, *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction*.

12 Cf. Wu Zenglan 吴曾兰 Wu Yu 吴虞, 'Nüquan pingyi' 女权平议 [Equal discussion on women's rights], *Xin qingnian*新青年 [New youth] 3, no. 4 (1917): 90–4.

13 Ibid., 36.

14 Ibid.

15 For instance, the three representative novels with the theme of gay men emerged in Ming Dynasty, and they were: *Longyang yishi*龙阳逸史、*Yixiang chunzhi*宜香春质、*Bian er'chai*弁而钗. In the literature of the Ming and Qing dynasties, there were only two fictions with ambiguous lesbian theme: 'Lianxiang ban' 怜香伴and 'Feng sanniang' 封三娘in *Liaozhai zhiy*聊斋志异 (Strange tales from a Chinese studio).

16 Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 21.

17 Lu Yin庐隐, 'Lishi de riji' 丽石的日记 [Lishi's diaries], *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小说月报 [Short story monthly] 14, no. 6 (June 1923): 16–23.

18 Ibid., 17.

19 'Indeed we have a long-term plan and last night we were so excited when talking about our future life! I dreamed that there would be a thatched cottage standing by a crystal stream and we would plant two willow trees in front of our house … We rowed it (the boat) in the clear ripples deep into bushes of reeds … Until night I and Yuanqing would hang out in that Crystal Palace.' Ibid., 19.

20 Zhuang Qinghua庄清华, *Zhongguo gudai mengxi yanjiu*中国古代梦戏研究 [The study on ancient Chinese theatre about dream] (Beijing: shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2015), 113. Cf. Wang Fengyan汪凤炎, 'Lun Zhongguo gudai shimeng xinlixue sixiang' 论中国古代释梦心理学思想 [On ancient Chinese Ideas about dream Interpretation psychology] (Nanjing: nanjing shifan daxue xuebao, 1997).

21 Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 140.

22 A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 45.

23 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, 48.

24 Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 139.

25 Lu Yin, 'Lishi de riji', 20. In this chapter, unless specified otherwise, all translations are by myself.

26 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 96.

27 Many scholars think that the fictional representations of intimate female same-sex relationships in Republican Chinese women's literature emphasized more on the emotional, platonic, and aesthetic elements of a relationship than the physical ones. Cf. Meng Yue孟悦 and Dai Jinhua戴锦华, *Fuchu lishi dibiao: xiandai funü wenxue yanjiu*浮出历史地表: 现代妇女文学研究 [Emerging from history: a study on modern Chinese women's literature], (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2018), 56.

28 Lu Yin, 'Lishi de riji', 20.

29 Ibid.

30 S. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (London: Picador, 1953), 443.

31 Lu Yin庐隐, 'Zhongxueshidai shenghuo de huiyi' 中学时代生活的回忆 [Memory of secondary school life], in *Lu Yin zizhuan*庐隐自传 [Autobiography of Lu Yin], Jin Li 金理ed. (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2011), 167.

32 Meng Yue孟悦 and Dai Jinhua戴锦华, 'Fuchu lishi dibiao', 57.

33 Some scholars see implicitness as a strong discourse of sexual consciousness, not as an externalized way of overtly categorizing homosexuality as deviant to pressure individuals, but as a way of denying any traces of unacceptable erotic identities and behaviours through indifference. Cf. Ding Naifei丁乃非, Bai Ruimei白瑞梅 and Liu Renpeng刘人鹏, *Wangliang wen Jing: Ku'er yuedu gonglue*罔两问景:酷儿阅读攻略 [Wangliang asking Jing: a guide for reading queer] (Taoyuan: Zhongyang daxue xingbie yanjiushi chubanshe, 2007), 1–11.

34 Lu Yin庐隐, 'Haibin guren' 海滨故人 [Old friends on the seaside], *Xiaoshuo yuebao*小说月报 [Short story monthly] 14, no. 10 (1923): 126–43.

35 Ibid.

36 The scholar Liu Renpeng has insightfully proposed to use a concept of 'saint-king order' to understand the elevated status of women since the late Qing Dynasty. The so-called saint-king order, which corresponds to political and social relations, is already heterosexual, with a series of dichotomous categories such as king/subject, father/son, and male/female, and the former is always the pre-determined moral superior, and the latter is necessarily subordinate to it. To talk about the equality of men and women under the hierarchy of saints and kings is not to focus on equality, but on the value of the 'progressive-backward' hierarchy. Cf. Liu Renpeng 刘人鹏, *Jindai Zhongguo nüquan lunshu* 近代中国女权论述: 国族、翻译与性别政治 [On women's rights of modern China: nation, translation, and gender politics] (Taipei: xuesheng shuju, 2000).

37 Suxin 素心 (Ling Shuhua 凌叔华), 'Shuo you zheme yihui shi' 说有这么一回事 [There is such a thing], *Chenbao fukan* 晨报副刊 [Supplement of morning news] (May 1926): 5–7.

38 The story of Mulan is a Chinese ancient legend, in which a young Chinese woman who disguises herself as a man and joins the army to save her father's life.

39 Zhang Yanbing 张岩冰, *Nüquan zhuyi wenlun* 女权主义文论 [The literature of feminism], (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998), 56.

40 'There is such a thing' actually is a rewriting of the short story 'Why did she become lunatic suddenly' by Yang Zhensheng 杨振声. Ling Shuhua was invited by Yang Zhensheng to rewrite his fiction. The two works share the same story blueprint, but are

different in their description ways. Cf. Yang Zhensheng 杨振声, ‘Ta weishenme turan fafeng le’ 她为什么忽然发疯了 [Why did she become lunatic suddenly], *Chenbao fukan* 晨报副刊(Supplement of morning news) (January 1926): 13–14.

41 Suxin 素心 (Ling Shuhua 凌叔华), ‘Shuo you zheme yihui shi’, 6.

42 ‘So, she (Zhiqing) laughed at the old and new classmates who had taken a vow to die for the name. Some of them had let their parents marry them off to some family or business family that did not please them; others had let themselves be given to the officers as young grandmothers; others had compromised and let their friends dictate their fate by introducing them to a random person to end the affair. The rest, those who still embraced the flag, embraced their girlfriends, gave each other affectionate looks, made intimate noises, and did nothing different from what a newlywed couple would do.’ Cf. Ding Ling丁玲, ‘Shujia zhong’ 暑假中 [During summer vacation], *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小说月报 [Short story monthly] 19, no. 5 (1928): 4–27.

43 As Fran Martin shows in her monograph, loving relations between women in Chinese mass culture are usually represented as past experiences, and female protagonists always revel in the repeated, mournful narration of their memories. Cf. Fran Martin. B*ackward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

44 Ding Ling, ‘Shujia Zhong’, 22.

45 In April 1927 Guomindang forces, aided by urban gangsters and warlord militias, attacked members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Shanghai. Hundreds of communists were rounded up, arrested and tortured; most were executed or assassinated. This became known as the ‘1927 White Terror’, or Shanghai Massacre.

46 Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 153.

47 Since 1920s, Chinese advocates of enlightenment discovered that what they could carry on were more limited than what they had imagined at the height of 1919 May Fourth movement. Additionally, Vera Schwarcz also mentions that White Terror (1927) and the failure of revolution posed too great a threat to the vision of May Fourth enlightenment. Cf. Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment*, 9, 195.

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Chapter 5

OBSCURE UTOPIA: THE LESBIAN CONTINUUM IN WANG ANYI'S 'BROTHERS'

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How have same-sex romantic relationships between women been portrayed in the Post-Mao era? Tze-lan D. Sang (2003, 163–74) and Fran Martin (2010, 75–92) have each provided an incisive analysis of female same-sex relationships and pointed out that women's sexual desires were rediscovered after the Cultural Revolution. With reference to these previous studies, this paper will discuss the works of Wang Anyi, one of the leading writers in Chinese literature since the 1980s. Compared to the women writers who have focused on the depiction of women's personal experiences, Wang Anyi has been a socially conscious writer depicting a wide range of themes. Her novella 'Brothers', which focuses on homoerotic desire between women, has a different feel and weight from the women depicted by other authors. 'Brothers' is the story of three female college students who act like they are male siblings and whose relationship is eventually dismantled by compulsory heterosexuality. It is a valuable text that depicts the spectrum of friendship and affection between women without actually using the terms 'lesbian' or 'homosexuality'. Through a close reading of this novel, I will attempt to analyse the possibilities and limitations of the portrayal of incipient lesbianism in China in the late 1980s.

The notion of romantic love, introduced to China in the late nineteenth century and regarded as absolute since the May Fourth Movement, was suppressed by the Chinese Communist Party. During the Mao era, Chinese literature began depicting girls who chose the Communist Party and the revolution over love and marriage. China became extremely politicized owing to the Anti-Rightist Campaign that started in 1957 and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76); during this time, love itself was rarely depicted. In the era of reform and opening up that followed, sexuality and gender roles were rediscovered, and romantic love was revived as a noble sentiment. How was the relationship between heterosexuality and sisterhood portrayed after that? To answer this question, this article focuses on 'Brothers' (Dixiongmen 弟兄们),[1] a novella by Wang Anyi (1954–), one of modern China's leading writers. The novella describes how female students adapt to mainstream gender norms as they graduate and leave the close confines of a women's dormitory in the 1980s, breaking ties with their same-sex roommates. In this chapter, I first outline the contents of 'Brothers' and then place the life of the female students described in this novel in the genealogy of the school stories written after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Using American poet and critic Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum (lesbianism that is not necessarily based on genital sexuality), I analyse the possibilities and limitations of strong ties between women in 'Brothers'.

About 'Brothers'

'Brothers' was released just prior to the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989. The novella is set in an art university in Nanjing where three married female students pretend to be brothers and call each other Lao Da (the eldest), Lao Er (the second) and Lao San (the third). Here, they try to form an eternal friendship reminiscent of the 'Oath in the Peach

Garden' scene in *Sanguozhi Yanyi* 三國志演義 (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms). They 'outshine the men in every way': their room is 'even dirtier and messier than the rooms of the male students', and they 'take food and wine to their dormitory and begin singing like three sworn brothers'.[2] Within the confines of the school and with each woman separated from her partner, these three women form a friendship that mimics a sworn brotherhood and swear they will never have children because after getting married, their bodies are only semi-free; if they have children, they will not be able to keep even that partial freedom of their bodies (Wang, 476). However, as graduation approaches, Lao San decides to follow her husband back to her hometown and leaves her 'brothers'.[3] After leaving school and losing Lao San, Lao Da and Lao Er separate to go to Shanghai and Nanjing, respectively, to start teaching. There, Lao Wang (lit. 'Old Wang', known at school as Lao Er) is depicted as living a monotonous life, but then the story takes an unexpected turn: a pregnant Lao Li (lit. 'Old Li', previously Lao Da) comes to visit her. To distract themselves from the pain of the disappearance of Lao San (no other name is given for her), they decide to call each other by their proper surnames and they realize that they are passionately attracted to each other. Lao Li's husband is horrified by the relationship between the two women and tries his best to separate them. The two finally end their friendship, not for the sake of Lao Li's husband but rather, for Lao Li's newborn child.

Several studies have investigated this work in Chinese and interpreted the friendship among the three women from a feminist perspective. Zhang Jingyuan (1992), for example, concludes that the story is aimed at exploring the significance of women and how the ideology of phallocentric logos is distorted and incomplete. Dai Jinhua (2007, 212), echoing Zhang's argument, states that the protagonists' attempt to find the 'female self' or a 'spiritual adventure' ultimately fizzles out because the women are merely objects defined and constructed by a masculine culture, and their meanings and names are all based on assumptions made by men. Patricia Sieber's (2001) introduction to the anthology that contains the English version of 'Brothers' explains that Wang depicts the process in which two married women who attempt to find their female selves and satisfy their egos are absorbed into the roles of wife and mother (Location No. 243/4472). This paper basically follows these previous studies, but focuses on the school dormitory setting where these women's ties emerged, and highlights the descriptions of their relationships. In regard to the theme of female students' solidarity in modern Chinese literature, I draw from Tze-Lan D. Sang's (2003) study on female same-sex desire and Fran Martin's (2010) representations of same-sex love between schoolgirls. In light of these works, I attempt to understand Wang Anyi's female student characters who try to construct same-sex romantic relationships, and give an overview of the female student figure in the New China.

Female students in the PRC

Since the establishment of the female education system, Chinese literature has depicted female student stories in various ways. Cultured girls, who did not exist in premodern times, have at times been the object of curiosity or ridicule, and at other times of adoration or love. Female students during the Republican period enjoyed being able to study as male students did and nurtured romantic relationships with their schoolmates, but they were nevertheless anxious about their futures after graduation. For these female students who were not expected to achieve self-realization in any way other than starting a family, their school days were nothing more than a brief interlude of happy moments. Once they graduated, they had no choice but to be included in the ranks of the 'married women's club' (*nüjiehunyuan*).[4] Their impatience was triggered by the prospects of their own future – that they could not use what they had learned in school for work. At the same time, they were even more concerned that the friendships they had cultivated at their schools would end and that their close ties with their same-sex friends would be broken. This was because

their prospects depended more on their husbands and children than on their own efforts, and once married, they would find it difficult to visit their friends with whom they had lived day and night.[5]

These anxieties about the future seemed to have been dispelled with the establishment of the PRC. When loyalty to the party became the top priority, authors found it difficult to praise heterosexual love affairs; instead, they started to focus on same-sex friendship as the driving force of the revolution.[6] It was only after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and schools reopened and students returned to the cities that women were reminded of the difficulty of maintaining same-sex ties after graduation.[7] 'The Ark' (1982), a novella by Zhang Jie (1937–2022), depicts the lives of three former female classmates after the Cultural Revolution. These women had divorced (or were separated) and were living in a society that prioritized efficiency. What they discovered after being tossed around in a decade of madness was the irrefutable reality that society belongs to men. The story of these three women, who had talents and aspirations but experienced unnecessary hardships due to their inability to cater to male society, exposes the shortcomings of the Party's version of women's liberation.

'Brothers', like 'The Ark', is about three women, although the story theme is not as clear. While 'The Ark' focuses on the exhaustion of life for women who finished school and failed in their marriages, 'Brothers' emphasizes the gap between women's school days and their later lives. Given that Lao Wang is described as a first-year junior early in the Cultural Revolution during the height of the Red Guard battles, she is almost the same generation as Wang Anyi (born in 1954), and a generation younger than the protagonists of 'The Ark'. Because all the young people of this generation had experienced the 'sent down to the countryside' movement (*xia fang*) that saw them transported from urban to rural areas, they did not attend university until 1977 when the entrance examination system was revived. Lao Wang would have been in her mid-twenties, and the fact that all three female students were married (and were probably of different ages) reflects this particular historical context. There is no actual direct mention of this in the text, but it must have been an unprecedented turning point in their lives when they could finally leave the countryside to study at a university in Nanjing. This might have been the reason for their strong connection, and Lao San's use of the term 'comrade in arms' to quote Mao Zedong at the time of their separation is the only part of the text that evokes the political experience common to the brothers. In this sense, 'Brothers' can be said to be a novel about the educated youth (*zhiqing*) who survived the Cultural Revolution, an extraordinarily politicized decade.

Changing viewpoints, repeating time

This novel consists of five chapters and is divided into three parts: The first is the dormitory life experienced by the three female students (chapter 1); the next is after graduation, as Lao Wang is leading a life of boredom at home and work until she reunites with Lao Li, who is pregnant (chapter 2); and the last section is when they regain the intimacy of their school days for a short period until they separate forever because of an accident, and Lao Wang becomes isolated again (chapters 3–5). The entire story is narrated in the third person, but a major feature of this novel is that each part focuses on a different character and has both singular and plural viewpoints. For example, in the first part, most of the subjects are referred to as 'they' or 'them', giving the readers the strong impression that the three of them together constitute one personality. This can be seen in the description at the beginning of the novel:

> At the Art Institute, the *three women* considered each other sworn brothers, calling themselves Lao Da, Lao Er, and Lao San. *They* spoke of *their* husbands as "Of Lao Da," "Of Lao Er," and "Of Lao San." *The three "laos"* were the only women in the class, but

> *they* outshone the men in every way. *Their* shared dorm room was even dirtier and messier than the rooms of the male students. *They* washed their dishes only just before using them, and *their* clothes only just before *their* weekly showers. When Lao Da came back with a plaster head she had filched from the art room, Lao Er gave it a painted moustache, and Lao drew a pair of glasses. The stolen head took its place on a table among other miscellaneous objects. *They* got up later than even the laziest of the boys; on Sundays and holidays *the three* could sleep from one evening to the next. The sunlight shone through the windows, creeping over and beyond *their* motionless quilts, on which the moonlight then took its place. But on *their* diligent days, *they* got up earlier than the most energetic boys. *They* put on their walking shoes and quietly walked through the darkest part of the campus before dawn to climb Phoenix Hill. … On such a night *they* did not sleep. *They* opened *their* hearts and spoke about *their* innermost secret thoughts. What a rare and powerful moment in the course of a human life! (Italics added by author.)[8]

At this stage, the women's actions are largely interchangeable, and no surname is given to them. The surnames of Lao Da (Li) and Lao Er (Wang) are not revealed until Lao San's intrusive husband appears and calls them by name; only Lao San remains unnamed until the end of the novel. (By the same token, the word 'of' is usually used to describe 'the wife of', but the three female students who considered themselves brothers referred to their husbands as 'of', as in '[the husband] Of Lao Da'.) Moreover, no reference is made regarding the appearance, expression, clothing, speech or anything that can identify any of the three. Wang Anyi, a writer who prefers to strip her characters of their names, looks and other imagery to portray them as the only mindful, idealistic entities, uses this style in 'Brothers'. In contrast to the three middle-aged women depicted in 'The Ark', each in a completely different situation and with a different appearance and occupation (which is why they are able to bond and support each other), these brothers are depicted as a trinity. The 'deepest hidden feelings' they confide in each other are so quickly shared among them that they are not recognizable as individuals.

This ambiguity applies not only to the characters but also to the narrative time. It was when Lao San's husband, Of Lao San, who worked at the Cultural House in Tongshan, Xuzhou, visited her in their dormitory in Nanjing that the equilibrium among the three brothers was broken. Lao San's husband called Lao Da 'eldest sister' (Da jie) and Lao 'second sister' (Er jie) in an attempt to apply the acceptable sisterhood terminology to the three self-identified brothers, but Lao Da and Lao Er 'frowned at these forms of address, considering them very vulgar'.[9] The scene highlights the disparity between the brotherly bond created by the three female students and how that bond is seen by the outside world; what is even more remarkable is that this visit by Of Lao San is *not* depicted as an incident that occurred on any particular day. The author meticulously attaches a few adverbs to Lao San's husband's visit. 'Of Lao San began to visit Nanjing *often* on business trips', and 'a*s usual*, this particular meal was his treat', and '[n]ow either a *summer vacation* or a *winter vacation* began'. The outrageous behaviour of the three female students, the equilibrium disturbed by the visit of one of their husbands, the subsequent repair of the relationship, and the foreboding coming summer and winter vacations are a series of events that circulated and recurred within the school's closed space. The campus represents a space where the same things happen every day of the week and every season, and in that recurring space, the brothers lived a (seemingly) interchangeable life.

They talked through the night, appreciating the happy fact that the three of them had met. Dai Jinhua calls it the process of finding one's self and discovering the meaning of 'self' (2007, 211). The three engaged in endless dialogue about who they were, love, and men and women, but their troubles did not belong to any particular individual. Just as individuals and time remain unidentified, their struggles also continue to be interchangeable – until the intrusion of 'Of Lao San'.

As we will see, ‘Brothers’ is essentially a story about the affectionate relationship between Lao Er and Lao Da, but it is hard to forget what ‘brothers’ meant to the three women when they were at school. This trinity mimics the men who swear a fraternal oath in *Sanguozhi yanyi*, while also remaining free from exclusive one-on-one intimacy. Their relationship is unique, but for each of them, the object of obsession is not an individual, but the other two brothers. In other words, the temporary utopian three-person relationship excludes the opposite sex (husbands) and the intimate space is formed not of only two people – all of which is a double violation of the prevailing gender norms that specifies that real love can only exist between men and women, and that it develops into an exclusive one-on-one relationship. This heterosexual gender norm is the one that governed the women before they entered school, and it must be followed again after graduation. Lao San – who chooses the heterosexual norm after agonizing over whether to stay in Nanjing or follow her husband back to the countryside – said that she wished she had been hit by a car and killed that very day. ‘She had never been so free before she met them, nor would she ever be in the future. … After this day, as a wife and a mother, she would have many obligations and could not afford to be negligent.’[10] In a world stripped of norms and obligations, they had never experienced doubt as a matter of course; they were fully enjoying the time to be completely themselves. It was always in the back of their minds that this free time would vanish after graduation. Lao San’s somber expression and the sadness of the brothers who saw it underscored the fact that graduation would be a crucial time in their lives. So why did the experience in the girls’ quarters create such a close bond? In the next section, I consider the nature of that bond and why it had to end.

Compulsory heterosexuality and the dismantling of a paradise

I now turn to the concept of the lesbian continuum that can be applied to decipher the relationship of the women in ‘Brothers’. This term has a strong connection with compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian existence.[11] Compulsory heterosexuality is a system in which heterosexuality is considered an immovable norm, the affection and desire for same-sex partners are suppressed, and people are forced to continue behaving as heterosexuals, even if they are not heterosexual. For Rich, it is particularly problematic that heterosexuality is being forced on women ‘as a means of assuring [the] male right of physical, economical, and emotional access’.[12] Under the immutable social norms, heterosexism forces women to simultaneously love men and act as objects of their desire. This is the backbone that underpins patriarchy, a structure in which women are forced to depend on men, and it is this pressure that drives Lao San to return home. She tries to explain this in terms of ‘love’, but as we saw, the three brothers had realized that this (heterosexual) love was full of deceit.

Another concept raised by Rich in the same article is that of the lesbian continuum. This refers to the bond between women that serves to counter the compulsory heterosexuality described above. Rich also uses the term ‘lesbian existence’, which she defines differently from a woman who loves a woman in a sexual way: ‘women’s choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe’ (632). Rich calls this continuum, ‘not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman’ and suggests ‘expand[ing] it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support’.[13]

In this essay, I use the term ‘lesbian continuum’ as a reference to the bond between women, a bond that is inconvenient, threatening and even horrifying to heterosexuality, to forcing women to fall in love with men, striving to be a woman loved by men, and eventually to becoming mothers for the sake of patriarchy’s survival. Rich says that what

men truly fear is being shown how women can be totally indifferent to men. Is this not a variation of this lesbian continuum that is depicted in ‘Brothers’? This continuum does not contradict the fact that the women love(d) their husbands. The fact that heterosexual women with ‘normal marriages’ crave ties with members of the same sex rather than only solidarity with their husbands is the reason Rich refers to the continuity of the continuum.[14] That is, we can acknowledge that the ties between women are not a special phenomenon only of women who desire women, and that there is a loose continuity between women who love women and women who love men. Lao San’s husband was uncomfortable with the relationship among the women because they did not accept the dominant norm of heterocentrism.

However, this bond between the pseudo-siblings eventually fell apart and the women were pressured back into heterosexuality. The sentence, ‘The *final* semester came’ was introduced with the foreshadowing that the paradise enjoyed by the three female students was finally coming to an end. When these women graduated, they were irreversibly forced once again into a linear, never-repeated flow of time. Lao San, who was from the small town of Tongshan, had to decide whether to stay and teach at a school in Nanjing or go back to Tongshan with her husband. Her husband, who wanted to bring his wife back to his home, gradually began to expose his hostility and contempt for the bond between the three, not only showing his dislike of the name ‘Lao San’, which suggested a brotherly relationship, but he also publicly and deliberately tried to put her in her place when he visited Nanjing.

Lao Da and Lao Er try to convince Lao San that staying in Nanjing is her only chance to change her fate, but she tells them that Of Lao San would never agree to be transferred to Nanjing for her sake.

> If a man followed his wife, he would never be able to hold his head up.
>
> The other two sworn brothers smile coldly. According to his logic, his woman should follow him so that he could hold his head high and crow, and all the woman got in return was silence.
>
> Feeling somewhat agitated, Lao San began to defend her husband; that was not his view at all. The other two kept sneering and insisted that it was his view. Feeling cornered, Lao San blurted out without thinking, ‘If a man cannot take responsibility for his woman, isn’t that a sad thing for us?’ The other two were taken aback by her remark, for they did not expect Lao San to be able to say such self-defeating things. After a while, Lao Da said slowly, ‘Lao San, you are being muddle-headed. He is not taking care of you. It is clear that he cannot take responsibility for you. He is asking you to sacrifice your future for the sake of his vanity.’ Lao Er added, ‘At such a moment, the ideal act of masculinity would be to give you free reign to explore the world!’ Lao Da laughed and said that would be a grand gesture. But Lao San started to cry, saying that she did not want a grand gesture, all she wanted was peace and harmony between husband and wife. This sudden revelation of an ordinary wifely ideal was a terrible disappointment for the other two. They fell silent.[15]

This is the scene in which the thought of being an ordinary wife sprouted in the mind of one of the three brothers, who then decided to leave the other two forever.[16] Lao San acknowledged that both brothers had hit the nail on the head. On her last day at the dorm, Lao San smiled and said that it would be wonderful if a car would hit her that day. Thus, Lao San vanished without even being given a proper name, and what happened to her after that was never discussed. As soon as Lao San graduated from the paradise that was school, she was permanently sucked into the small town that she had married into. It was the first crack in the lesbian continuum the trio had built, and it also meant that Lao Da and Lao Er were about to be transformed from being points on a triangle into unique beings for each other.

Runaway undercurrent

After graduation, the story turns its focus solely on Lao Er, now called Lao Wang. After falling out of touch with her brothers she becomes a fine arts teacher in a high school in Nanjing where she tries to focus on extracurricular instruction in addition to her regular job, takes up knitting, and puts on makeup and goes shopping, but nothing fills her emptiness. Although her career as an art teacher is directly related to what she had learned in school, she does not have a passion for it. In this respect, Lao Wang is different from Zhang Jie's single-minded heroines who aimed to contribute to society. Notably, Lao Wang's husband, unlike Lao San's, understood her more than she understood herself, and knew how to live with her while also respecting her feelings. Lao Wang was educated and had a profession and an understanding partner; therefore, viewing her situation in the context of 'The Ark', there was nothing wrong with her life. Nevertheless, she remains depressed and bored, and helplessly wonders what she has to live for. The question about what one lives for is directly connected to the question of ego that she had been discussing with her brothers during her school days:

> Coming to know one another woke the true selves within them. They finally came to know what each of them was like. They relinquished apprehensions and impediments and released their true selves. What Lao Wang was looking for was not a job nor a loving home, but 'the liberation of one's true self.' In other words, even her husband, who tolerated her licentiousness and viewed her way of life positively, had not been able to free her true self. Being stuck, Lao Wang suddenly countered her principle of not having children. For suddenly she could not even wait until the next day to give birth so that her empty life could somehow be filled. She had heard that motherly love could sacrifice all things gladly. She thought, if this 'self' of mine cannot reach its full satisfaction, I may just as well let it be sacrificed in a big way. Better to be a shattered vessel of jade than an unbroken clay pot. … She felt that a solemn sacrifice was accumulating within her belly.[17]

Lao Wang's sudden desire for children, which she had thought she did not need, was not due to an awakening of maternal love. On the contrary, this feeling was connected with the reason she and her brothers had made a vow in school that they would never have children: 'They said that being already married they had only semi-free bodies. If they had children, they could not even keep the semi-free bodies.'[18] Unable to develop her 'self' fully at work, at home or in her hobbies after graduation, Lao Wang decides to rid herself of her half-free state and attempts to conceive so that she can spend all her time on something other than herself. It is a solemn sacrifice and a choice to fill the void.

The very next day, as Lao Wang is hoping to get pregnant in order to give up the 'half freedom' left to her, Lao Li, who *is* pregnant, visits her at work. It is the first time they have seen each other since graduation. This coincidence causes the child that is supposed to fill the void in Lao Wang's life to be replaced by Lao Li, whose presence becomes a major part of her life. What brings them closer is that Lao Li wants a child for the same reason as Lao Wang: Lao Li is a person with a rich inner life, beyond what is easy to bear. She knows that a child will mean another tremendous emotional burden – in her case, an extraordinary one – and her wish to maintain her personal freedom will be completely thwarted. But still she wants to have a child: without one, she will feel empty.[19] Actually, Lao Li also wants a child to fill her void. This sometimes leaves her engrossed with dark premonitions and anticipating further bondage to come. As if to fill this anxiety, her renewed friendship with Lao Wang again takes precedence over everything.

The story then enters the third part, and the text is once again flooded with the use of the pronouns 'they' and 'them'. Now that Lao San is gone, the two confirm their exclusive one-on-one bond, writing lengthy letters that they send to each other's workplace lest their

husbands find and read them. From that point, they once again lose their individuality and form an entity called ‘them’.

> In *their* letters *they* marveled at *themselves*. Why did *they* have so much to talk about? For *they* each had a husband, and a husband was supposed to be closer than a friend. But what *they* talked about with their husbands was very limited. In their next round of letters, *they both* realized that there was a profound reason for this. … Dialogue on the spiritual and ideological level could only take place between two parties who maintained a certain distance. And the two parties had to be people of the same sex, because exchanges between people of different sexes inevitably went astray, with ideas overwhelmed by sexual desire, and spiritual communication eventually blocked and replaced by physical communion. The only possibility for spiritual dialogue was between people of the same sex.[20]

The narrative establishes a dichotomy between desire and thought as well as between body and spirit based on the ‘common sense’ of heterosexual norms that define same-sex ties as relationships based entirely on thought or spirit and never on mutual desire. However, these ‘safety declarations’ do not have to be taken too seriously – there is no contradiction between the characters’ statements that same-sex relationships do not involve desire and the fact that these women love each other. Above all, their relationship encroaches on the inner workings of the father–mother–child household espoused by heterosexual norms. Lao Wang decides to be the godmother of Lao Li’s child. ‘In her mind, she had already excluded the baby’s father. She thought of the baby as having two family members: his birth mother and his godmother.’[21]

> How could this thought not affect Lao Li’s husband? During the summer holidays, Lao Wang stayed at Lao Li’s house for an extended period to take care of the woman and her baby. While outwardly grateful, Lao Li’s husband was annoyed because ‘it seemed that she had divided his family’ and felt intensely uncomfortable with Lao Wang calling his wife ‘Lao Li.’
>
> When at first he heard this, he thought she was calling him, and replied: ‘I am sorry, my surname is not Li.’ Unexpectedly, she said, ‘I am not talking to you.’ Calling his wife ‘Lao Li’ sounded weird and ugly to him, as though his wife was no longer his wife when she answered to this name, but rather some man or some other person.[22]

When these two drank together, their private, code-filled conversations about their school days were wide-ranging and chaotic, leaving Lao Li’s husband out of the conversation. Ecstatic looks showed on their faces as they declared they would go to the sea together the next summer, ‘We won’t invite anyone else, just you and me’ (Wang, 503). Seeing the two declare this so elatedly, Lao Li’s husband was horrified at imagining the sight of the two women by the sea and considered it crazy. ‘“Horrific” was a word thrown at the two women, but … (h)e also realized that this woman’s presence tapped into the dynamic force hidden deep inside Lao Li’s heart. If not for this force, Lao Wang would never have been able to disturb his family life. Of course, then Lao Wang and Lao Li would not have been friends.’[23]

Ironically, before Lao Li and Lao Wang reunited, Lao Li’s husband had become aware that ‘On the surface, Lao Li seemed calm and peaceful, but deep within the still waters, there was turbulence’.[24] Anxious that the turbulence might one day explode, he once held a wild party with his colleagues, wishing he could ‘give his woman’s dangerous undercurrent some opportunities for release’.[25] In the midst of the bash that would bring neighbours knocking at the door, ‘His wife always maintained her composure and serenity throughout, thus causing even the worst of them to behave a little in front of her.’[26] Apparently, he did not have the power to unleash her true undercurrent. This corresponded with the failure of Lao Wang’s husband to free Lao Wang’s ‘true self’. This true self had an uncontrollable

destructive power that posed a threat to their peaceful 'normal' lives, and this threat was triggered when the two women, who had been separated, saw each other again. Around the Lunar Year, Lao Wang once again visited Lao Li at her house, and they came up with the idea of travelling around the country, making drawings and photographs of peasants, and holding a two-person exhibition. The dream made the two women feel intoxicated, but it meant travelling and rejecting the idea of a fixed home, job, lifestyle and societal norms – nothing less than an attempt to break with the husband and child in their midst.

Punishment

Lao Li and Lao Wang's relationship culminated in their dream of wandering around the whole of China together. They believed that their bond, unlike the lust between men and women, was 'pure and exalted ... all supported by reason', and that it was between 'the highest of human beings'. One day, Lao Wang asked Lao Li what would happen if they both fell hopelessly in love with the same man? Lao Li immediately answered, 'Kill the man'.[27]

From the idea of two women loving one man, we can view this with homosocial relationships. The love triangle assumed by Lao Wang and Lao Li in this scene acts precisely as the flip side of what Eve Sedgwick (1985) called the male bond, making the relationship between the two women even more romantic than it otherwise would be. It may be only natural that their relationship, which had mimicked a relationship as brothers when they were in the girls' dormitory, had come to mimic the homosocial bond of men in this way. The man they might both fall in love with at the same time is a virtual tool that works only to confirm the intimacy of *their* relationship. In fact, the women became even more emotional: 'Her reply ["Kill the man"] moved Lao Wang to tears. Little did they know that their conversation had actually reached the edge of a dangerous precipice. Their friendship had already reached a turning point.'[28]

Clearly, the words 'the edge of a dangerous precipice' are those of the narrator or author,[29] predicting that the women, who had arrived at the pinnacle of solidarity that was stronger than their love for their husbands, would not be able to fulfil their dream of travelling together. Immediately after this, Lao Li's child was injured in the park and the women's bond was abruptly severed. Lao Li's baby, who had tumbled out of the stroller behind the two women who were engrossed in their discussion, cut its face to the bone on an exposed tree root. Shaken by the injury, which could not be blamed on Lao Wang, Lao Li shouted 'My child!' and when Lao Wang immediately tried to save the baby, she yelled at her, 'Don't touch my child!' Lao Wang 'felt her heart being smashed to pieces'.[30] After that, in the space of a single day Lao Li turned back into an ordinary housewife. She had no thought for anything but her child and no regard for Lao Wang, who was extremely hurt by the words Lao Li had shouted at her. Lao Wang was thus reminded that the 'real mother, godmother, and child' was not a real family and in fact, nothing but an illusion.

The significance of this relatively minor incident is explained by the narrator's foreshadowing in saying that the relationship between the two, having entered dangerous territory, was at a turning point. This incident established a causal link between the injury of the child and the 'misconduct' of the two women; but what, then, was the transgression that had made them deserving of such a punishment? Can it be blamed solely on the friendship that led to this point? The answer can be found in the rest of the novella.

> Soon after this incident, having escorted Lao Wang to the ticket gate at the Shanghai train station where she would board the train for Nanjing, Lao Li realized once again that Lao Wang was irreplaceable to her. Then she pulled Lao Wang out of the line and said, 'I love you, really! I love you!' Between them, the word 'love' had never been used, because the word had been desecrated by its association with sexual intercourse between men and women. But now Lao Li used it. Tears fell from Lao

> Wang's eyes, but she said, 'It's late; it's already too late now.' Lao Li also wept. Through her tears, she insisted, 'No, it's not late, not late at all.' 'It is late; it is too late!' Lao Wang cried, her tears streaming down. 'There are some things that are extremely beautiful but very fragile. Once broken, they cannot be repaired.'[31]

This last conversation between the two reveals how their relationship that they had described as being completely logical and the apex of same-sex solidarity had become just like what can only be described as the 'love desecrated by sexual intercourse between men and women'. The bond they hailed as completely logical was beautiful but also so fragile and emotional. When it was about to be lost forever, Lao Li had no choice but to call it love. They positioned their bond as pure, noble, rational, and peerless, separate from their material (physical) relationship with their husbands, but in fact, that bond was a manifestation of love – a love that posed a danger that could threaten a home built on heterosexual norms.

The dangerous territory mentioned by the narrator reflected the fact that they were women who loved women, and that their love had deepened to the point that they would kill a man if they ever happened loved the same man. When they were students, they already dreamed of an abyss – a world of only women without men. This abyss that no one had ever seen appeared immediately before their eyes and quickly vanished forever.

In fact, this novel is not the first to depict women's dream of living a life without marriage in modern China. In *Old Friends by the Seashore*[32] first published more than sixty years ago, Lu Yin laments how her girlfriends' romantic relationships have prevented them from living the way they used to. Lu Yin depicts the strong bonding of women students and their desire to maintain this community after graduation. Their forced dissolution due to the pressures of heterosexuality can be said to be similar to that in 'Brothers'. However, in Luyin's time, this yearning was portrayed as only a pipe dream – the women were too powerless in the face of social norms for it to be considered possible.

'Brothers' goes a step further. Even in this novel, the lesbian continuum is certainly not described as acceptable in general society. Until the end of the novel, neither the women nor the narrator were willing to be open about their latent desires. However, this 'dangerous territory' was one step closer to being realized through the women's concrete dream of travelling all over China without their husbands and child. It was nothing other than Lao Li's own, rather abrupt, awakening to motherhood and refusal to break away from the traditional family that prevents that dream from being realized. However, even after awakening to motherhood, Lao Li confesses her love to Lao Wang a few days later. Lao Wang rejects that love, saying it is too late, but the fact that the couple breaks up forever over a minor incident shows how naive and single-minded their love is. Eventually, after becoming entangled with their lovers, and just as Lao San did after graduation, Lao Li also disappears forever from Lao Wang's life.

'Brothers' closes with a scene that takes place a few years after the break-up: Lao Wang visits the Sanxia alone after her emotional wounds have finally healed. At this point, the story harkens back to the two-woman exhibition that Lao Wang and Lao Li had planned to hold at Sanxia. The title they were going to use for the exhibition was 'Brothers', but the relationship between them was lost forever before they could carry out their dream. Lao Wang's post in which she said she had no idea what she really wanted shows that even after she broke up with Lao Li and returned to the world of heterosexual norms, she was unable to regain her sense of self.

In 'Brothers', the two main characters end up separated. However, this ending is not necessarily an indication of Wang Anyi's conservatism. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Wang Anyi has been a standard-bearer of intellectual youth literature and interrogative literature from a young age, earning an unshakeable reputation as representative of writers born in the 1950s. This distinguished writer who stands in the mainstream of the literary world and has written grand narratives about topics such as revolution and politics has written clearly about the power of the bond between women –

the lesbian continuum or, to use the vocabulary in the novel, the ‘dangerous undercurrent’. It is significant that a writer who has been in the mainstream has made this powerful bond between women visible through language. The process of the crushing of the pure bond among the three women by the intangible pressures of gender norms highlights the limits of tolerance in China and the queer solidarity that has remained a source of strength for women in the face of harsh realities. Thus, ‘Brothers’ is a work of great significance in the collection of queer literature of the PRC.

Notes

1 ‘Dixiongmen’ was first published in the literary journal, *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest), no. 3 in 1 used in this paper is from Wang 1996, *Wang Anyi zixuan ji 2*, 464–519. The English transl Zhang’s 2001 translation of Wang’s ‘Dixiongmen’. The translations in this paper are Zhan author.

2 Wang Anyi 王安忆, ‘Brothers’, translated by Jingyuan Zhang, in *Red Is Not the Only Color: and Sex between Women, Collected Stories*, ed. Patricia Sieber (Lanham: Roman and Littl

3 Hereafter, whenever ‘brothers’ is used, it will be used in reference to the three women.

4 In one of her stories, Eileen Chang explains this: ‘Because of her family background, the d allowed to be a female clerk or a female typist. Becoming the “female matrimonial” was t (Withering Flower), *Zazhi* 雜誌 12, no. 6 (March 1944): 87.

5 Hamada Maya 濱田麻矢, *Shojo Chugoku* 少女中国 (A Young Girl’s China; Tokyo: Iwanamisho

6 For example, Xie Jin’s 謝晋1960 film *Hongse niangzijun* 紅色娘子軍(The Red Detachment of story of a group of girls who use their friendship to cultivate their power and use it for the military uniforms and living together in a girls’ dormitory, the image is analogous to a gro

7 Many of the educated youth novels set during the Cultural Revolution are about proletaria other when they were sent to places foreign to them, but remained isolated and focused Wang Anyi, 1986. *69 Jie chuzhongsheng* 69届初中生 The Junior High Graduates of 1969; B chubanshe).

8 Wang, ‘Brothers’, 464–5.

9 Ibid., 467.

10 Ibid., 474.

11 Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summ

12 Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, 647.

13 Ibid., 649.

14 Ibid., 657.

15 Wang, ‘Brothers’, 472–3.

16 Zhang Jingyuan 张京媛, ‘Jiegou shenhua: Ping Wang Anyi de “Dixiongmen”’ 解构神话:评王安 deconstruction: Assessing Wang Anyi’s ‘Brothers’), *Dangdai Zuojia Pinglun*, no. 2 (1992): https://www.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD9093&filename=DDZP199202003&uniplatform=OVERSEA&vxeOMe8KTNy6F5psgyUB2kCKztN39Hl-QiM

17 Wang, ‘Brothers’, 484.

18 Ibid., 476.

19 Ibid., 489.

20 Ibid., 497.

21 Ibid., 498.

22 Ibid., 500.

23 Ibid., 508.

24 Ibid., 490.
25 Ibid., 496.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 513.
28 Ibid.
29 After the Tiananmen Square Incident Wang Anyi started using a metafictional storytelling 叔叔的故事 (Uncle's Story) in *Harvest*, 1990, no. 5. However, we can see a pre-emptive met appearance in the text heralds what is to come). See Hamada Maya 濱田麻矢, 'Saiyaku no An'oku "Ojisan no monogatari" kara' 災厄の物語は共有されうるか:王安憶『おじさんの物語』か shared? Wang Anyi's 'Uncle's Story' revisited), in *The Humanities of Coexistence: Global T* 学, ed. the Society for Symbiotic Ethics (Kyoto: Showado, 2008), 128–49.
30 Wang, 'Brothers', 514.
31 Ibid., 518.
32 Lu 1923. *Xiaoshuoyuebao* 小説月報(Fiction Monthly) vol. 14, no. 10 and no. 12 in 1923 Oct

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dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD9093&filename=DDZP199202003&uniplatform=OVERSEA&
vxeOMe8KTNy6F5psgyUB2kCKztN39HI-OiM

Chapter 6

PERVERSE LESBIANISM: BDSM, RAPE AND INCEST IN CYBER CHINESE GIRLS' LOVE FANFICS

Jamie J. Zhao

Literary and media fantasies that exist outside dominant, heteropatriarchal scripts of gender and sexuality often offer fertile grounds for audiences and fans to experiment with nonnormative pleasures of women's sexual relations and desire. Indeed, thanks to the popularization of the public's Internet use in China starting in the early 2000s, fiction writing dedicated to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities has been possible in online Chinese-language forums, such as the 'Going All the Way Together' (*yilu tongxing* 一路同行) board on the popular Tianya discussion forum (天涯论坛).[1] With the category label 'Right Bank' (*you'an* 右岸) on the board, original stories about queer women were actively and passionately circulated and consumed. The earliest and most commercially successful online novel about Chinese lesbians that was later published by Chinese Drama Press in 2005, *My Angel, My Love* (*Wode tianshi wode ai* 我的天使我的爱), was first circulated by its author Hailan (海蓝) as an original, autobiographical lesbian romance on the board. The novel is considered the female version of the famous online Chinese gay novel, *Beijing Story* (*Beijing gushi* 北京故事) by Xiao He (筱禾), which was later adapted into the internationally accoladed queer Sinophone film *Lan Yu* (dir. Stanley Kwan, 2001).[2]

To some extent, the year 2005 can be seen as the starting point for the 'golden age' of Chinese queer women's media, especially for online literary productions about queer women. Along with the growing number of gender-nonnormative female celebrities in Chinese and Sinophone entertainment media since 2005,[3] fiction about female same-sex romance and (sexual) relationships, also known as Girls' Love (GL or *baihe* 百合), by Chinese female-identifying authors has been flourishing in cyberspace. While the articulation of the least 'noticeable' voices and desires of Chinese women in the print media age has been largely enabled and encouraged through producing, circulating, consuming and rewriting online GL fiction, GL has remained less popular and less commercially successful compared to its male counterpart in Asian queer media, Boys' Love (BL or *danmei* 耽美). Even until more recently, the emergence of digital Chinese commercial media platforms, such as websites of online literature, audio drama, comics and video streaming, to capitalize on both local Chinese and cross-culturally translated and circulated Asian GL has been witnessed, responding to the decline of Chinese BL media caused by the government's ideological-moral denigration of male effeminacy and homoeroticism. Yet, academic attention to online Chinese GL literature remains sporadic.

This research fills this gap by exploring one of the earliest female-identifying GL writers, Clockwork Orange 521 (*fatiaocheng 521* 发条橙 521; CO521 hereafter), whose novels sensationalized the Chinese cyberspace through the late 2000s.[4] As an avid fan of pop culture and a productive queer fiction writer, CO521 produced a number of lengthy and widely popular homoerotic stories (also known as queer fanfics) dedicated to emerging TV and music stars with nonnormative gender personas who rose to stardom through their participation in popular Chinese singing competition shows between 2005 and 2010. Her

writings include both male and female same-sex fanfics. Some of the most notable ones that remain widely discussed online nowadays are GL fanfics *Ka Fu Ka* (卡夫卡; *Kavka*, 2006) – queerly coupling two androgynous Chinese female singers Zhou Bichang and Huang Yali, who rose to fame in 2005, and *Feise Shi* (绯色事; *Pink Affair*, 2006) and *Zhongdu* (中毒; *Intoxication*, 2007) – both of which are queer readings of androgynous Chinese female singers Liu Liyang and Shang Wenjie who rose to fame in 2006, as well as the BL fanfic *Wangle Aiwo* (忘了爱我; *Forget to Love Me*, 2007) – dedicated to two Chinese young male idols who rose to stardom in 2007, Su Xing and Wei Chen.

Most of CO521's fanfics were originally circulated on Baidu Post Bar (百度贴吧*baidu tieba*) – the most popular Chinese-language fan-dominated communicative platform in the first decade of the twenty-first century – and drew tremendous attention from online fans and readers. Although many of these stories that were published between 2006 and 2011 have been partly or entirely removed by the site administrators or lost due to the inactive status of the writer on the site, some fan-archived versions of the most popular ones have remained widely discussed and consumed on social media (such as Weibo and Douban) and web-based literature websites in the Chinese and Sinophone worlds. One user-made list posted to Baidu Zhidao (百度知道; an interactive knowledge-sharing platform) on 22 December 2022 includes *Pink Affair* as one of the most recommended GL novels, which showcases the wide and enduring influence of CO521's GL fanfics in Chinese cyberspace.[5]

Some main narrative features that might have contributed to the lasting popularity of CO521's GL fanfics are their dark-romance style, bad or open endings and the overwhelmingly erotic portrayals of lesbian sexual encounters, including scenes of BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism), incest and sexual violence. This should not be a surprise to her readers, since her pen name references the globally famous X-rated film *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971), featuring extensive visual depictions and metaphors of sexual violence and adapted from the original 1962 novel of the same title by Anthony Burgess. Yet, it was extremely rare to see such original GL literature produced and consumed in Chinese cyberspace at the time. Most of the original Chinese lesbian novels in the 2000s tended to narrate stories of the 'innocent love' (纯爱 *chun'ai*) between young women, which often have no happy endings (or no future at all) due to normative society's pressure and prejudice. These 'innocent-love' lesbian stories more frequently feature nonfictional representations of real-world struggles and pains of being and living as lesbians in China. Literary emphases on lesbian sex and sexual pleasure, instead of spiritual love, were unusual, also partly due to online censorship of pornographic content.[6]

This chapter pays particular attention to the 'bad sex'[7] in CO521's GL fanfics produced before the burgeoning of the mainstream, commercial media's blatant cashing in on queer pop cultures in post-2010 China.[8] These explicit portrayals of lesbian sex dwell on the intersections of lesbianism and the least morally (and even the least legally) legitimate sexual desires and practices in heteropatriarchal-normative societies. Teresa de Lauretis once pointed out that dominant scholarly interpretations of Freudian psychoanalysis had tended to produce 'a model of positive, "normal," heterosexual, and reproductive sexuality'.[9] Yet, as she emphasized, it is important to capture 'a model of perverse desire that may account for the representation of lesbianism in texts of fiction, film, poetry, and drama' that may be 'constituted in relation to a *sexual* difference from socially dominant, institutionalised, heterosexual forms'.[10] Rather than intending to present a Freudian psychoanalytical analysis of the GL fanfics, I find de Lauretis's conceptualization of 'perverse' as 'not pathological but rather non-heterosexual or non-normatively heterosexual' or even non-reproductive particularly useful.[11] Following her call for articulating 'perverse desire' in textual representations of lesbianism, I examine the torture, rape and incestuous sequences common in two of the most read and most controversial CO521's GL fanfics in cyberspace, *Pink Affair* and *Intoxication*.[12]

More specifically, I discuss the sex roles, gendered subjectivities and power dynamics during the narrated unconventional lesbian sexual encounters. While these tropes resist the alleged legitimacy and centrality of heterosexual sex patterns in mainstream Chinese culture, they have also been persistently negotiating with multivalent constructions of lesbianism, including heteropatriarchal cultures' reconfigurations of female sex, gender, sexuality, desire and pleasure, as well as certain prevalent subgenres and clichés of queer Chinese cyber literature. The graphic depictions of women's radical and non-consensual sexual relationships, in this sense, can be understood as sophisticated writing tactics through which the writer discursively creates, legitimizes and even dramatizes lesbian stories against a still largely heteronormative Chinese sociocultural backdrop. I argue that the frequent deployment of these radical sexual tropes and textual strategies of violent and/or forbidden sex in overtly erotic representations of lesbianism in the fanfics actively contests the mainstream cultural anxieties surrounding the 'authenticity' and 'continuance' of female same-sex desire and sexual pleasure. Ultimately, my research unveils a queer version of *écriture féminine*,[13] that is, 'a feminine writing which works differently as a means of representation from male language',[14] realized through the female homoerotic imaginaries in CO521's GL writings where a lesbian *jouissance* (female sexual pleasure) is reclaimed and narrated in sensational, fictive and highly erotic ways. These fanfics are an excellent illustration of a neonatal Chinese liberating feminist voice fostered by both increasingly diverse representations of women on Chinese TV and the development of digital communicative spaces. Despite the government's constant manipulation and banning of online feminist and queer expressions throughout the twenty-first century (especially under the reign of Hu Jintao between 2002 and 2012 and then taken on by Xi Jinping in 2012), the heavily eroticized GL fanfics point to promising, feasible ways to powerfully denounce the heteropatriarchal negation of women's gendered subjectivity and sexual autonomy.

A feminist reading of perverse lesbianism in GL

Both *Pink Affair* and *Intoxication* are devoted to queer readings of the aforementioned two Chinese reality TV celebrities and singers, Liu and Shang. Both stories belong to a subgenre of East Asian fan productions known as *jia kong* (架空; a word directly borrowed from Japanese to denote the act of creating fictive personas, worlds and stories about celebrities, media characters or public figures).[15] The stories are set in fictive settings and narrate the two as stepsisters (later revealed as blood-related half-sisters) or sisters in law. Both fanfics are incomplete. Right after CO521 posted them online, the controversial plot designs stirred up heated debates, as well as complaints, within the queer fandom of the two celebrities. Many readers expressed concerns and anxiety over the protagonists' morally questionable relations and the author's narration of unconventional sexual practices. Eventually, CO521 was so frustrated by some of the reader comments posted under her fanfics that she decided not to continue with either fanfic. Nevertheless, the majority of *Pink Affair* has already been finished and posted by her on the Baidu Post Bar. It is more than 300,000 words in length with an open ending in its major plotline and lacks only one chapter of sequel (番外 *fanwai*).[16] *Intoxication* contains fifty published chapters, which has also developed some major plotlines concerning the two women's romantic and sexual relationships.

Representing the 'impossible' lesbian sex

Almost all of CO521's fanfics combine typical features of 'abuse fiction' (虐文 *nue wen*), which 'features physical and mental abuse'[17] and the 'hurt-comfort' genre in which one

protagonist is psychologically or physically damaged and healed by the other. *Pink Affair* is the most representative one. In this fiction, Liu, a tomboyish girl, and Shang, a relatively androgynous girl who later grows up to be the more feminine one in their relationship, are depicted as half-sisters who did not know that they share the same biological father. They have been raised together as stepsisters (from the age of twelve years old) and fell in love with each other when they were teenagers. They once lived as a lesbian couple after they grew up. Yet, shortly after Shang's mother revealed the two's biological relationship, Shang cannot face this truth. Cutting off all contact with her family and friends, she travelled to Tibet and settled down in a secluded, heaven-like area, Linzhi, by herself. After the father of Liu and Shang died, Liu started several years of searching for Shang, even after the police announced to her by mistake that Shang had died in a mudslide. Both stayed single for years before their reunion in Tibet. When they turned thirty years old, Liu found and reunited with Shang. Eventually, the two decide to live in Linzhi together for the rest of their lives.

In this story, while the two's heteronormative family (with their parents), located in one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, Shanghai, signifies the heterocentric civil society, their father symbolizes the hypocritical, ideologically manipulative patriarch in this story. He cheated on Liu's mother, got Shang's mother pregnant, and later forced Liu and Shang to live together under the same roof, which eventually led to this incestuous lesbian tragedy. Only after his death could Liu and Shang resume their lesbian love in a remote place that is far away from the cosmopolitan, highly modernized Chinese world, as well as mainstream heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality. Linzhi is described in the fanfic as a lesbian or queer paradise within China, where people do not judge or discriminate against single mature women, and the heteropatriarchal social system is annihilated. This imaginary of Linzhi renders it a liveable, friendly place for Chinese lesbians within the geopolitical borders of China. To some extent, these queer narrative settings and developments also aim to set free its readers from the shackles of normative concerns and anxieties surrounding the two's incestuous relationship.

Interestingly, as a fanfic containing lengthy, explicit erotic scenes of the two protagonists' sexual encounters, all the plots of BDSM and non-consensual sex between the two happen in urban settings instead of the lesbian-friendly, yet less civilized and modernized Linzhi, where the two are unfettered from the constraints of heteronormative-patriarchal social-familial morality. Existing studies relate BDSM to sexual pleasure, dissidence, escapism and transcendence.[18] Practices of BDSM are found to be a play of temporality and healing for personal trauma,[19] which allow viable moments and spaces for the participant to 'escape[s] from oneself, or at least certain aspects of oneself'.[20] Moreover, when situating BDSM elements in queer fanfics, research finds that 'fan fiction BDSM occurs between characters individuated by richly detailed psychological and interpersonal backstories and who exist within a particular cultural and historical context, not between blank social types in a privileged space outside law and society'.[21] These might help to explain why all the explicitly erotic and sexually violent scenes, as well as BDSM practices, in *Pink Affair* are all narrated in urban environments regulated by heteropatriarchal moral and legal orders.

Yet, it is also worth noting that the BDSM and rapist fantasies in *Pink Affair* work in a much more complicated way than a pure escapist therapy does. The intricately interwoven plotlines of lesbianism, incest taboo, BDSM and other nonmainstream sexual psychologies in the story function as a radical manoeuvre for the author to contest and negotiate with Chinese heteropatriarchal cultures' silencing, ignorance and negation of lesbianism. The detailed depictions of lesbians' various, even non-consensual, sexual behaviours help to dramatically demystify the sexualities of the 'unrepresentable' women, especially that of the 'impossible lesbians' (meaning lesbian desires are not straightforwardly suppressed but usually signified as absent, non-existent, intolerable or unnatural in literary representations

through, in Valeri Rohy's words, 'the homophobic discourse of "impossibility"') of an adult world,[22] though perhaps achieved in the most provocative ways.

For instance, during the BDSM scenes, the butch Liu always performs the dominant sex role, who expresses her anger and frustration through her sexual abusing, even raping, of Shang; while Shang, most of the time, plays the seemingly submissive, passive role who endures Liu's abuse in silence. She later in the story also roughly takes Liu (a stone butch)'s virginity through vaginal penetration. In addition, the fanfic presents some detailed narratives of Shang's sexual orgasms and even her female ejaculation during the two's sexual encounters. This recuperation of the dominant gender hierarchy (the masculine dominant top vs. the feminine passive bottom) and traditional gender characteristics, as well as the unexpected reversal of it, can also be viewed as an ultimate queer play or queer mocking of the invisibility and unthinkability of lesbian gender identities and sexual practices. This is more evident in the other fanfic about Liu and Shang, *Intoxication*.

Different from *Pink Affair,* which narrates the long-term romance between the two since their teenage years, *Intoxication* tells about an immoral sexual relationship between two grown-up women. The story begins during a summer when the butch Liu (twenty-three years old) was staying together with her brother and sister-in-law, Shang, in the beach house owned by Liu's wealthy parents. The author soon reveals that Liu's brother was sexually impotent, which leads Liu to accidentally walk in on her newly wedded sister-in-law Shang masturbating in the bathroom one night. The two women soon develop an intense extramarital sexual relationship, at the beginning of which Liu, as a sexually experienced, womanizer-type lesbian, only seduced Shang to satisfy their own sexual desire. Yet, later the two gradually fell in love with each other after spending more time together. Both of them started to struggle with their own feelings and feel guilty towards the man who connects them together, especially when Liu's brother's impotence was remedied after the summer.

This incomplete fanfic is saturated with extensive portrayals of the use of sex toys (such as dildos) and aphrodisiacs during BDSM and rape scenes. The two women are portrayed as enjoying BDSM and using it to express their intense, exclusive love for each other. Yet, after Liu caught Shang resuming her sex life with her brother in order to force herself to (pretend to) enjoy having sex with the man to whom she is married (which painfully failed, as revealed by Shang's own narration), a large number of quasi-non-consensual sex scenes are presented. These violent sex scenes often took place when Liu felt frustrated or insecure by their non-exclusive relationship involving her brother. She forced Shang to have sex with her even in front of her sleeping brother, who had passed out after being drugged by her. While Shang was depicted as silently enduring this kind of mental and physical sex-related torture, even rape, initiated by Liu, the presentation of these seemingly abusive sexual practices ended up with heavy narration of the sexual satisfaction and multiple orgasms of the two. The only exception is the time when Liu raped Shang with a dildo to insult her 'love' and 'interest' towards men. Afterwards, Shang showed no evidence of sexual gratification but only signs of being in great pain and sadness. This experience also evinces Shang's later confession to Liu that she started feeling repelled by men's penetration (and even cannot bear the virginal penetration by a dildo) during sexual encounters after she realized her feelings for Liu and started a love-driven sexual relationship with her.

These depictions on lesbian sex are also closely interspersed with the two protagonists' inner monologues revealing their moral struggles and uncertainties with own nonnormative desires and sexual practices. For instance, responding to Liu's constant shame-provoking action through vociferously calling her 'sister-in-law' (嫂子 *saozi*) during intimate moments and in front of other relatives in the family, Shang as the one who had been confused by her own sexual orientation and urges asked Liu and herself whether the (non-reproductive) sex between women could be counted as a form of extramarital affairs and cheating. During their one-year-long on-and-off sexual relationship, Liu also frequently self-questioned if she seduced Shang just for fulfilling her primitive desire and special taste in

non-traditional sexual play and abuse. Yet, both are portrayed as being reassured over and over again by the intense emotional and physical pleasure gained through their sexual encounters that their desires are mutual, exclusive and rooted in their deep love for each other. The author deploys these highly eroticized tropes to contrast the deep, distorted and unspeakable love, anger and despair of the two, especially those of the married woman who realized that she had intense, unlawful same-sex desire for her husband's young sister. Nevertheless, due to their pornographic nature, most parts of these depictions of lesbian sex were deleted by the administrator of the Baidu Post Bar shortly after they were posted.

A corpus of literature finds that representations of sexual violence in media, especially the ones between same-sex characters, can be seen as a romantic element to explore the sexual tension between pleasure and danger.[23] These nonmainstream and sometimes radical sexual fantasies are believed to have no direct relationship to real-world sexual violence, misconduct and abuse, but are a writing technique to represent romantic and sexual pleasure.[24] For instance, as Tania Modleski once famously noted, 'the rapist mentality' in romance rape scenes is sexual desire 'disguised as the intention to dominate and hurt'.[25] In queer fan studies, in particular, rape and BDSM sex scenes are categorized as extreme cases of the hurt-comfort genre that aim at revealing the emotional closeness and physical attraction between the protagonists.[26] The violent sex in queer fanfics can thus facilitate the characters' 'attraction, love and sexual need for each other to be expressed openly. And in turn, that expression transforms the threat of sexual violence into consensual lovemaking'.[27]

These understandings of violent sex and rape might partly justify the heavy depictions of nonconventional sex between women in CO521's GL fanfics. Yet it should be emphasized that these intentionally erotic portrayals of lesbianism are not necessarily 'disconnected' with the heteronormative-patriarchal reality for Chinese women. Take, for example, the sensational textual presentation of women's multiple orgasms and female ejaculation, as well as the butch lesbian's use of a dildo, during lesbian sex. These imaginaries were (and remain) rare in Chinese visual and textual media. They are even hard to find in today's underground LGBTQ media productions available to Chinese audiences. In contrast to the documentary-style or autobiographical lesbian media (such as the one mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, *My Angel, My Love*) which often picture a gloomy future for women's innocent love, the eye-opening sexual fantasies in CO521's GL fanfics not only challenge the knowledge limit of online queer fans and readers about lesbianism but also fundamentally ridicule 'the opposition between "masculine" clitoral activity and "feminine" vaginal passivity … in the development of a sexually "normal" woman' stipulated by a narcissistic, phallocentric society.[28] What is presented in and revolutionalized through CO521's GL, rather, is a deconstructive means to radicalize female sexual expressions. By so doing, the author dismantles mainstream culture's expunging of diverse nonnormative female sexualities and desires within a Chinese-specific phallocentric economy in cyberspace which often 'position[s] the female body and the feminine as the site of subordination, penetration and insult'.[29]

Lesbianism as destiny

Another commonality shared by the two GL fanfics is the recurrent motif of 'destiny' (宿命 *suming*). In the plot of *Intoxication*, although the two adult women are connected to each other by the man in the family, the story later reveals that the two already met and were emotionally attached to each other since they were in kindergarten. Yet, neither of them recognized each other at first in the summer beach house after being parted for many years. This may be interpreted as CO521's technique of narration to actively criticize and reroute the prevalent literary cliché in heterosexual and BL media, the sister-in-law genre (嫂子文学 *saozi wenxue*) that often simplifies and explains the romantic attraction between

the two protagonists as an illusion caused by the sexual desire and tension within an intimate, familial setting featuring care, comfort, love and forgiveness. Yet, notably, the word 'destiny' is literally being repeated many times by the author in *Pink Affair*, which is centralized in the narratives to connect the two characters together through eighteen years, despite their immoral incestuous relationship. By painting the two women's same-sex romance as an incestuous destiny, the author implies that there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome by their destined love. Their lesbian love and emotional bonding are all tightly entangled with their blood relationship.

For instance, as *Pink Affair* narrates, after Shang ran away from their Shanghai home, Liu had a dream in which Shang told her that

> We are blood-related. No one else on earth can have such a close relationship. It feels like you are a part of me and I'm a part of you. Nothing can separate us, even the change of heart over time. I'm leaving, but from now on would forever wander for you, live for you, and die for you.

Seemingly, this narrative mode – emphasizing the fact that these two are lovers and their lives are inevitably intertwined together because of their 'destiny' or their biological relationship – may be read as a way to downplay or minimize the lesbian nature of the story. Nevertheless, interestingly, the motif of 'destiny' is also a particularly common and popular theme in contemporary Chinese GL cyber literature. For instance, by June 2023, eight of the top ten most archived GL stories on one of the most influential queer literature sites in Chinese cyberspace, Jinjiang Literature City (晋江文学城 *Jinjiang wenxue cheng*), centre their lesbian romance around this 'destined' plotline,[30] such as the top one on the list, *My Dear Miss Forensic* (我亲爱的法医小姐 *Wo qin'ai de fayi xiaojie*), the fourth on the list, *For the Rest of My Life* (余生为期 *Yusheng weiqi*) and the tenth on the list, *The Whole World Is Waiting for You to Fall in Love* (全世界都在等你心动 *Quanshijie douzai dengni xindong*). These novels all narrate the two lesbian lovers as either having met when they were young (or at least when one of the two was a young girl in preliminary or middle school) and reunited after years of being parted or having grown up together since a young age and thus been inseparable by social pressure.

In this sense, this 'destiny' plotline can also be conceived as a creative and strong response to the prevalent trivialization of women's same-sex desire in contemporary commercial Chinese-language media as something temporary, fleeting, ambiguous and confusing for teenage girls who are just entering puberty and are struggling to figure out their own gender and sexual identities and desires.[31] Furthermore, it is more intriguing to combine this 'destiny' theme with a 'perverse' trope of 'sisterhood' in *Pink Affair*. Research has shown that in premodern and modern (Republic era) Chinese media, female same-sex imaginaries were often considered as women's 'sentiment' (情 *qing*) camouflaged under the broad social relationality, sisterhood (or female homosociality).[32] This tradition to mitigate the 'authenticity' of Chinese women's same-sex love indirectly contributes to the temporary sociocultural tolerance, as well as prevailing Chinese textual and media portrayals, of female same-sex attraction in girl school settings. In these same-sex girl-only sociocultural environments, the girls and young women are often portrayed as having their sexual impulses awakening, yet they cannot or are forbidden to date teenage boys or men in their daily social circles. The same-sex desire of the girls is thus implied in these normative cultural and media imaginaries as a transient feeling derived from and closely linked to their intense female friendship. These 'substitutional', 'inauthentic' relations and desires will not last long (or cannot last) when the girls enter female adulthood and meet the 'real' men to get married and form families, either willingly or reluctantly. Nevertheless, the enduring, unbreakable incestuous relationship in *Pink Affair* not only fundamentally queers sisterhood but also transgresses the hypocritical moral and sexual orders prescribed by dominant Chinese heteropatriarchal-structured marital, familial and social systems.

Some Anglophone literary studies contend that incest is a sign of pure love and an ultimate narcissism that inevitably leads towards self-destruction and death.[33] The incestuous plot of *Pink Affair*, in this vein, might function as a writing technique to cast a tragic hue on the story. Yet, the interesting combination of incest and lesbianism can also be read as an essentially transgressive way to sabotage the orders of Chinese patriarchal family and mainstream society in general. As a body of feminist research has noted, incest, celibacy and lesbianism are alternative ways for women to constitute their own agency, undermine the heterosexual patrilineal relationships and actively speak for themselves.[34] Meanwhile, the marriage contract and male homosociality in heteropatriarchal society are established and sustained through trading out women between two groups of men.[35] Incest, therefore, is a radical breaking of the heteropatriarchal social taboos and 'an expression of potency, linked up with an indigenous notion of power'.[36] For Gayle Rubin, in particular, the incest taboo scripted in the phallocentric symbolic order assumes a heterosexual, feminine sexual passivity.[37] To dismantle this tabooed female sexuality, some feminist scholars have called for a 'lesbiani[sing] identity' that overthrows the heteropatriarchal naturalization of the binary sex category and explores the multiplicity of female sexuality that repudiates the inscription of '"feminine" vaginal passivity'.[38]

In addition, some research dedicated to Chinese father-son incestuous BL stories has revealed an underlying vital connection between queer fannish imaginaries and real-world socio-political environments.[39] As Yanrui Xu and Ling Yang powerfully contend, in the Chinese-language context, the word 'incest' (乱伦*luan lun*)

> has richer connotations than its English equivalent .... The word *luan* denotes confusion and disorder, while the word *lun* refers to kinship, human relations, order and meaning. The primary function of the incest taboo in feudal China was to prevent the disruption of both family and social order.[40]

Seen in this way, the act of incestuous sex in contemporary Chinese lesbian fanfics can also be understood as 'a[n ultimate] display of power' that speaks perversely and forcefully to the contemporary, patriarchal, suffocating Chinese society and eventually helps queer women to articulate numerous manifestations and possibilities of female identity, subjectivity, sexuality and desire in these unconventional sexual fantasies in literary forms.[41]

Coda: Writing a lesbian-centric erotic imaginary

Hélène Cixous famously noted that 'writing is precisely the very possibility of change'.[42] In the past two decades, Chinese female writers have seized the opportunity made possible by digital media and cyber communicative spaces to 'write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies' due to the repression of feminine *jouissance*.[43] The female homoerotic fantasies vociferously uttered in GL fanfic writing are an excellent queer transformation of a feminine writing that is 'beginning with the re-discovery of the body and rooted in the celebration of difference'.[44] Taking 'a romanticised vision of the female body as the site of writing',[45] CO521's GL productions augment the female gender and sexual desiring voices and magnify the value of a lesbian-centric imaginary in a fictive, homo-romanticized, highly erotic space that co-exists with, yet also separate from, mainstream Chinese society.

The GL stories analysed in this chapter simultaneously criticize phallocentrism and eulogize an independent female gender and sexual economy, which demonstrates one of the wildest and most radical illustrations of female subjectivity and agency initiated by *écriture féminine*. As José Esteban Muñoz once argued, queer utopia is crucial in that 'queer cultural production is both an acknowledgement of the lack that is endemic to any

heteronormative rendering of the world and a building, a "world making," in the face of that lack'.[46] Seen in this light, the 'queer world-making'[47] realized through CO521's erotic presentation of lesbianism working within and against heteropatriarchal familial-marital-social settings, although 'wilfully idealized',[48] powerfully satirizes mainstream media and society's vain denial of the wide existence, variety and persistence of queer women's intimacies and desires.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1 The board was suddenly forced to be removed from the Tianya discussion forum in 2017. a large number of highly appreciated original queer novels written by netizens.

2 See, https://book.douban.com/subject/1440783/

3 This point can be evidenced by some existing research. See, for example: Ling Yang and H Fans and Affective Communication in a Super Girl Fan Fiction Community', *Cultural Studi*

4 CO521 openly self-identifies as female on her own social media sites, such as Weibo. See, refer_flag=1005055013_. She was active in queer fanfic writing for years till the early 20 that she would not produce queer fiction anymore.

5 See, for example, https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/2275831505925501308.html

6 The Chinese government's online censorship of homosexual content has always been mer declaration on 'cleaning' the online sociocultural environment and protecting minor grou pornographic content, paedophilia and sexual predators. See, Meijiadai Bai, 'Regulation o Readers and Authors in Contemporary China (2010–2019)', *Cultural Studies* 36, no. 2 (20

7 Gayle Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011

8 Jamie J. Zhao, 'Queer, Yet Never Lesbian: A Ten-Year Look back at the Reality TV Singing C *Celebrity Studies* 9, no. 4 (2018): 470–86.

9 Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Blooming

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., xiii.

12 The original viewing and commenting records for the two fanfics are hard to trace now du posted chapters of these fanfics on Baidu Post Bar. Yet, their incomparable popularity and the data presented in earlier research on *Pink Affair* published in 2010 and 2012. See, Lin Literature, Women's Desire, and Feminism'. *Internet Culture and Literature* 9 (2010), http://www.raduga.com.cn/RMBase/SysJP/Multimedia/Pdf.ashx?ID=233299&contentid=7 'Queerly Intimate', and Jing (Jamie) Zhao, 'Queerly Imagining Super Girl in an Alternate W Femslash Romance', *Transformative Works and Cultures* 24 (2017), https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/download/870/820?inline=

13 Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Si*

14 Maureen Quilligan, *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England* (Philadelphia: University of I

15 The opposite genre of *jia kong* is real person slash in Anglophone queer fan cultures, whic relationships between real-world celebrities based on their real-life personalities, social in

16 Although disappointed by CO521's decision, many fan readers of this story produced thei give the couple an ending.

17 Yanrui Xu and Ling Yang, 'Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of *Graphic Novels and Comics* 4, no. 1 (2013): 32–3.

18 Gary W. Taylor and Jane M. Ussher, 'Making Sense of S&M: A Discourse Analytic Account', .

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 305.

21 Anne Kustritz, 'Painful Pleasures: Sacrifice, Consent, and the Resignification of BDSM Sym of Obi"', *Transformative Works and Cultures* 1 (2008), http://journal.transformativeworks.

22 Valerie Rohy, *Impossible Women: Lesbian Figures and American Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cor

23 Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popula* Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 262; also see, Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans* Routledge, 1992).

24 Helen Caudill, 'Tall, Dark, and Dangerous: Xena, the Quest, and the Wielding of Sexual Vic *Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors*, ed. Frances Early and Kathleen Ke Press, 2003), 35; Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s Ameri* Press, 2007), 224; Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for* 1982), 35; Paulina Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic* (London: Cassell, 1999), 118.

25 Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 35.

26 Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 262.

27 Caudill, 'Tall, Dark, and Dangerous', 35.

28 Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23.

29 Cara Wallis, 'Gender and China's Online Censorship Protest Culture', *Feminist Media Stud*

30 See, the list of the most viewed GL on Jinjiang Literature City here: https://www.jjwxc.net/ fw=1&ycx=1&xx=3&mainview=0&sd=0&lx=0&fg=0&bq=-1&isfinish=0&collectiontypes

31 Fran Martin, *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerc* University Press, 2010).

32 Tze-Lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chica

33 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writers and the* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

34 See, for example, Quilligan, *Incest and Agency*, 13; Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: N *an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 15 Woman', in *French Feminism Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Pub

35 Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: C

36 William Arens, *The Original Sin: Incest and Its Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press

37 Rubin, 'The Traffic', 195–6.

38 Wittig, 'A Lesbian', 119–52; and Irigaray, *The Sex*, 23–33.

39 Xu and Yang, 'Forbidden Love'.

40 Ibid., 38.

41 Ibid., 33.

42 Cixous, 'The Laugh', 879.

43 Ibid., 875.

44 Susan Sellers, 'Writing Women: Helene Cixous's Political "Sexts"', *Women's Studies Int. Fo*

45 Tori Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

46 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: Ne

47 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 40.

48 Ibid., 86.

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Part III

QUEER INTERSECTIONALITY

Chapter 7

TROUBLING OTHERS: ANXIETY ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY IN 1990S AUSTRALIAN SINOPHONE FICTION

Josh Stenberg

Chinese-language writing in Australia has garnered increased attention in recent years, constituting a necessary and overdue corrective to a Chinese-Australian history long written with too great a dependence on English sources.[1] Works using Chinese sources have already provided a much better idea of early and pre-Second World War Chinese press and fiction, and increasingly Cold War-era Chinese-language sources are also contributing to a better understanding of the Chinese-Australian community during the White Australia policy and in its wake.[2] Scholars are also doing important work on contemporary Sinophone communities in Australia, using or eliciting Chinese-language materials to understand the traditional and digital media landscapes, contemporary student experience or queer digital cultures.[3]

When it comes to Chinese-language *belles lettres*, considerable attention has settled on 多妻毒 (*Duoqi du; The Poison of Polygamy*), published serially in the Melbourne press in 1909–10, and thought to be the first Chinese-language novel in Australia.[4] But Chinese-language literary writing in Australia is still in the process of being discovered and catalogued, and the greatest focus in secondary literature has been on writers of the 1990s, most of whom were recent arrivals from the PRC. The reemergence of a Chinese-language literary scene in Australia at that time produced substantial Anglophone scholarly comment then and in the decade thereafter as well as occasionally even drawing attention from conservative journalists sceptical about migration.[5] It has since been revisited by those interested in expanding Chinese-language geographies of fiction, or of developing a more multilingual account of Australian literature.[6] The considerable Sinophone secondary response has largely remained unintegrated into Australian studies in English.

Although Hong Kongers, Taiwanese and Sino-Southeast Asians also had written and continued to write in Chinese, the 1990s wave of writing was largely the work of new PRC migrants, known as the Tiananmen generation. In fact, this is a somewhat misleading appellation, since most migrants did not come or stay for reasons directly relating to the 1989 protests or the crackdown thereon. However, the name speaks to important circumstances inasmuch as the first large PRC migration through the relatively open student visa system of the late 1980s took advantage of the pathways to residence that opened in the wake of June Fourth, even if the centrality of Prime Minister Bob Hawke's tearful Tiananmen speech can be overstated.[7] The Tiananmen generation is perhaps especially prominent in Australia because White Australia policies (lifted in 1972, but not resulting in larger-scale migration until the mid-1970s) had ensured that Asian migration was relatively rare and difficult in the post-War years, so that the migration of Hong Kong, Taiwanese and Southeast Asian Chinese had been relatively small. The Tiananmen generation's presence, literary and otherwise, is more prominent than in other Anglophone societies.

The Tiananmen generation's first choice mostly had not been Australia, with many arriving because 'Australia's [then-]recent policy of exporting English language training to

China as a means of foreign earning provided opportunities to those with nowhere else to go'.[8] Most struggled to survive financially, and became permanent residents not because of a long-held desire to immigrate but because of the shock waves of June Fourth, and the unexpected opportunities for residence afforded by the Hawke amnesty. Novels such as Liu Xi Rang's 雲斷澳洲路 (*Yunduan Aozhou lu; Oz Tales Sweet and Sour*) and Shen Zhimin's 墮落門 (*Duoluo men*; *The Gates of Decadence*) amusingly and sometimes powerfully chronicle the travails of this generation, personal and professional.

The 1990s Australian cities in which these migrants arrived were experiencing a high point of gay activism and culture and undergoing the ravages of the AIDS crisis. While earlier gay artists and intellectuals such as Sumner Locke Elliott or Patrick White had felt compelled to leave Australia to further their careers, by the 1990s openly gay figures such as Ralph McLean and Craig Johnston were prominent local politicians, the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney was in 1994 the largest open-air parade in the world, and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) was impressing Cannes with its exuberant portrayal of Aussie camp.[9] At the same time, the community was under medical siege, and during the period coinciding with the arrival of the Tiananmen generation AIDS left '[v]irtually no member of the gay community … untouched by this epidemic, and its impact [was] far greater in terms of lives lost than any natural disaster in Australia's history'.[10] Gay communities of the era were organizing politically and culturally, but were also at the epicentre of a medical emergency and the site of a moral panic.

It is unsurprising that these two contemporaneous phenomena – the reemergence of Chinese-language writing in Australia and the public emergence of gay life – should have interacted (and no doubt oral history could provide further Sinophone responses).[11] Also unsurprisingly, that record has not always aged well. In 1995, Sydney author Yuan Wei 袁瑋 produced an account of Mardi Gras that likely is meant to be raffish and perhaps even understanding, but which features passages such as:

> I suddenly realised that what I saw in front of me was just a blaze of colour, and who was a man and who a woman was anybody's guess. Say you were in the mood one day to go hit on some girls or whatever and you actually managed to land one and, with panting breath and heart beating at over a hundred you open your eyes to find that his thingie was pressing on you and just the same as your own, wouldn't you just black out and feel an irrepressible urge to bring back up whatever it is you have in your stomach (55).[12]

Further on in the same vignette, Yuan acknowledges the 'millions of mainland gays', concluding in an attempt at humour that the human rights organizations and migration companies of Sydney should look into the matter, since 'playing the homosexual game is subject to extreme discrimination in the mainland' (55), in which case their desire to leave China could represent a business opportunity. In Yuan's world, gay Chinese men, while subject to tolerance ('whoever feels like doing it can do it, they don't need to ask anyone' 55), ultimately also feature as objects of disgust, mockery and possibly profit-making.[13]

Eros and the white Australian

Eros was on the minds of the Australian Sinophone writers of the Tiananmen generation. Early 1990s Chinese-language fiction often featured 'the sexual needs of people far from home and families'[14] and by the mid-1990s much of Sinophone fiction in Australia dealt with the encounter of young Mainland Chinese students of the so-called Tiananmen Generation with the white Australian Other. Naturally, that encounter with the Other frequently contained an erotic dimension, although in these stories sexual freedom is just as often supplied not by white Australian society, but by the distance from the sociopolitical

environment of home and the acquisition of private spaces. No longer taboo for either mainstream white Australian or Chinese societies, such relations indeed became a 'central concern' for Sinophone literature in Australia in the period, with the erotic possibility of the white Australian a part of a more general tendency to make love and sexuality 'common themes' in the literature.[15]

With the exception of Ouyang Yu 歐陽昱, whose energetic translation (including self-translation) and commentary have made him the dominant figure in Anglophone knowledge of Australian Sinophone writing, little of 1990s Sinophone work has reached the wider Australian literary studies community, nor has it become well-known in China. The treatment of sex in 1990s fiction is perhaps most notable in the short fiction collection 澳洲情人: 澳大利亞中國留學生情愛小說選 (*Aozhou qingren: Aodaliya liuxuesheng qing'ai xiaoshuo xuan*, *The Australian Lovers: A Collection of Romantic Fiction by Chinese Students in Australia*, 1999), which borrowed its title from one of its component stories, by Jin Xing 金杏. The collection attracted a modicum of attention in English-language writing, including from Shen Yuan Fang (2001, who focuses on a story by Shi Guoying, though not the one considered below) and Kam Louie (2004). The 1990s encounter with white Australians has also been sensitively dissected in the dissertations of Liu Xi Rang and Huang Zhong, the latter focusing on the construction of masculinity. Given that topic, it is unsurprising that it is Huang (2012) who takes a specific interest in the encounter with Western homosexuality, providing a reading not only of 'Orchid Fingers' and 'The Story of Mark', two of the stories considered below, but also of the pages dealing with homosexuality in Ouyang Yu's sprawling Anglophone novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* (2005).

Despite these insightful contributions, depictions of white Australians in this corpus still represent a largely untapped resource for those wishing to use fiction to understand Chinese migration experience of the 1990s specifically, as well as Sinophone images of Australia (and its relation to broader concepts of 'West') in general. This chapter focuses on three stories where the anxious encounter with white Australians is inflected by homosexuality, leading to an ambivalence towards the receiving society.

The three stories under examination in the remainder of this chapter show greater interest and sympathy for gay men.[16] The stories, in my reading, navigate encounters between Chinese people with gay Australian men by three members of the Tiananmen generation: '馬克的故事' (*Make de gushi*, 'The Story of Mark', 1998) by 施國英 Shi Guoying; '蘭花手指' (*Lanhua shouzhi*, 'Orchid Fingers', 1998) by Shen Zhimin 沈志敏; and '憤怒的水壺' (*Fennu de shuihu*, 'The Angry Kettle', 1991) by Ding Xiaoqi 丁小琦. The position of each author is largely that of a concerned and sympathetic observer, and can be read as representing an engagement with the rules of their new society, and the way it offers personal liberties while falling well short of equality. All three authors are among the best-known of the 1990s Sinophone authors, and to the best of my knowledge, all three still live in Australia. Each text, none of which (again, to the best of my knowledge) is written by a queer-identified author, mix the anxiety of migration with that of challenges from the dominant society to the masculinity of Chinese characters.[17] Ultimately, homosexuality appears as both an aberration and a promise of freedom, modelling the ambivalence of heterosexual Chinese migrants to a promise of diversity and freedom that can seemingly easily slip into humiliation and/or – for this is also the era of the AIDS crisis – disease. Running parallel to the erotic theme in Sinophone fiction of the period is always also an assessment of Australian society, rising to the surface at the intersection of race and homosexuality, and concerned with the limits and excesses of personal and political freedoms.

Shi Guoying's tragic outsider

The first story that concerns us is entitled ‘The Story of Mark’ by Shi Guoying, born 1965 in Shanghai. Having worked for 文匯報 (*Wenhui bao, Wenhui Daily*) in Shanghai, Shi arrived in Sydney in 1989 and began working at 自立快報 (Zili kuaibao, *The Independence Daily*), and at the time of the publication of ‘The Story of Mark’ in 1998 was the chairwoman of the NSW Chinese Writers’ Association. She is perhaps best known for her 1994 article ‘同澳洲西人结婚幸福吗?’ (‘Tong Aozhou Xiren jiehun xingfu ma?’; ‘Are marriages with white Australians happy?’),[18] which generated criticism in the Chinese-language press, was covered by Australian Anglophone outlets, and provoked a conversation about Chinese masculinity that spread beyond Australia’s shores. Shi’s frank discussion of sexuality is a hallmark of her work, even if her fiction has received little secondary treatment. Four stories by Shi appear in the 1998 collection 她們沒有愛情 (*Tamen meiyou aiqing*; *They Have No Love*) which collected the work of nine Sydney Sinophone women authors, including ‘The Story of Mark’. Lily Xiao Hong Lee, in her foreword to the collection, highlighted the story as being in her view ‘the deepest and most sympathetic of Westerners’ in the volume, with ‘no sign of “occidentalism” at all’.[19]

The story begins with the male narrator, a male university student from China, who has been brought by a white Australian friend Joan to the dilapidated flat where Mark is ‘slouched on a fading red velvet couch, watching a television set that looked like it had been picked up off the street’.[20] There is some description of the apartment, which is in a general state of decay. Key information about Mark reaches us in the following way:

> My gaze fell upon Mark again, he was now talking with Joan about the Nobel laureate Patrick White, who had recently died. That was when I suddenly remembered that this big and tall man, whose every motion bespoke authority, was also a homosexual. In the half-year since I had arrived from China I had met more than a few homosexuals on the streets of Sydney or even at friends’ parties, but I had never met a homosexual like Mark who didn’t look like a homosexual.

Citing Patrick White places Mark at the literary and educated end of Sydney society, as does his association with authority and the fact that we are also told that Mark is more erudite and well-spoken than the average Australian. Mark assists not only the narrator but also Joan, a presumably white Australian classmate of the narrator, with editing their papers for advanced degrees at the University of Sydney. Mark also plays bridge and owns 5,000 books on the subject, a collection which, being constantly short of money, he is trying to sell so that he can travel to Europe. Formerly active in the Australian Labor Party, he counts among the close friends of his youth boys who have gone on to become, respectively, a federal MP and the opposition leader in the New South Wales parliament.[21]

He had been a young man of bright prospects. But ‘one day, Mark suddenly felt like all of this was meaningless, he stopped all his work and went home and slept, and that sleep had gone on for ten years’ (145). This dispiriting change is attributed to his homosexuality. He now spends his life in a circle of gay friends and lovers who never come much into focus for the narrator:

> Until he was twenty-five, he had a steady girlfriend, and this girlfriend was now his only female friend. Apparently, one day the girlfriend brought her present boyfriend to go see him and the boyfriend didn’t take to Mark. The girlfriend tore a strip off him, saying: if I want to make love, I’ll go see you, if I want to talk, I’ll go see Mark. And Mark’s theory was, hang out with amusing boyfriends to chat with, and boring ones to make love with. Among the latter there were no shortage of doctors and lawyers and so on.
>
> (145)

On the phone with his girlfriend in China, the narrator Chen relates the arrangement Joan has helped him make, by which Mark teaches him English. Chen reports that when he informs his girlfriend about his tutor's homosexuality, she 'didn't make a fuss about it, I know that she's not open-minded enough to imagine I'd get into any gay stuff. If I told her my English tutor was a white girl, then she'd be more likely to be a bit nervous about it' (145). Here, the narrator's denial of 'gay stuff' seems overcareful. To what degree is the narrator interested in Mark? He leaves the question open, assuring the reader instead that 'I'm Chinese, I have so many responsibilities', and that since his girlfriend had sacrificed her virginity to him and furthermore previously undergone two abortions, 'I'm bound to marry her' (145). One has the impression that the reason that an encounter between Chen and Mark cannot arise is because of practicalities and responsibilities, not because of a lack of interest or attraction.

Later, over drinks, Mark and the narrator Chen broach the subject of why Mark gave up his promising political career. Mark provides a defeatist account according to which little change can be effected in politics, which Chen counters with the idea that 'If good politicians emerge, they can change some aspects of human life' (147). But even that limited view is too optimistic for Mark, for whom the abjection of the homosexual proves the impossibility of political striving: 'You're too naïve, Chen. When someone becomes a politician they're not themselves anymore. For instance a politician just can't be a homosexual. So I prefer to be a homosexual and not a politician, since the former is myself, it's an instinctive need in my life' (147).

The relationship, fundamentally restricted to the teaching relationship, ends when Chen arrives at Mark's apartment for a lesson one day to find him shrouded in the smell of marijuana and lying on the sofa, naked from the waist up. Chen remarks, 'in the gloom, I heard a dream-like phrase floating up to me: "I still want to make love.'" Once Mark has woken up to realize who is at the door, he apologises: 'I'm sorry, I thought John hadn't left yet … ' (148)

Chen remarks to the reader:

> I knew about John, one of Mark's lovers. I remembered one time that Mark took up his address book, hesitating about whether he should choose Robert or John for the night, and in the end he chose John, because he would always bring some pot with him. Apparently John was the father of two kids and worked in a bank.
>
> (148)

Although there can be no language lesson now, they nevertheless have drinks. Mark thanks Chen for being forgiving and a kind person and Chen returns the praise, calling him a special person, although Mark (who is, at least by Chen's reckoning, in his early forties) responds by saying 'I'm only a middle-aged, frustrated homosexual' (149). He reveals that the landlord who never raised his rent (from 70 dollars) is now lying in hospital dying, and that the landlord's son is certain to throw him out. His trip to Europe seems as unlikely as a revival of his political fortunes, and Chen seems to conclude that it is sexual compulsion, allied to a drug habit, that has made a hash of a once-promising life.

Later, Chen, perhaps perturbed by his lingering interest in Mark, does not call Joan (who would have Mark's news) and instead remarks 'I hope that one day I will find a miracle on the streets of Sydney, and so I never made that phone call' (150). The 'miracle' may of course simply be the idea that Mark has pulled himself out of the morass of sex and drugs where Chen last saw him, but the mixture of fear and hope again suggests the possibility of homoerotic interest on Chen's part. However, at least in terms of literary logic a more likely result, given the crisis ripping apart Sydney's gay community at that time, and Mark's apparent promiscuity, is that he is dying of AIDS.

Shen Zhimin's abused newcomer

Shen Zhimin's 'Orchid Fingers' (1998) appeared in the anthology *The Australian Lovers* in the same year as 'The Story of Mark'. The story interrogates Chinese and Australian attitudes to homosexuality from a position of ultimately somewhat distanced empathy, although since its protagonist is a Chinese migrant gay man, the question of homosexuality is more immediate and personal than it is for Chen in 'The Story of Mark'. There is also less room to put homosexuality in a compartment marked 'for foreigners'.

The plot concerns Lin Xiting, a married man from China, who has come alone to Australia at the behest of his ambitious wife. The story incorporates several flashbacks to his life before his move to Sydney, most consequentially his participation in a 京剧 (*jingju*) enthusiasts' club that meets in a park and his shock at learning of the arrest and imprisonment of the group's leading male *dan* for homosexuality.[22] Arriving in Sydney, Lin is unable to find work and is close to despair when he stumbles upon the Mardi Gras parade. Among the fellow spectators he finds a factory foreman, Alan, who is of 'New Zealand aboriginal' (presumably Māori) background.

The two men, having struck up an acquaintance, enjoy the parade together and, as they follow the excess and flamboyance of the floats, Alan offers Lin a job in the ironworks where he is employed. Since Lin has been looking desperately for work, he is happy to agree. Lin is given minimal responsibilities to work due to the favour shown him by the mercurial Alan. This attracts the ire of the other Chinese students in the factory, who realize that Alan metes out preferable treatment to Lin as an object of desire. Alan appreciates the pale, dainty Lin, and invites him home to perform *jingju* selections (hence the orchid fingers, a standard *jingju* hand position, of the title).

But as Alan's drunken pawing of Lin worsens, Lin breaks with him, despite his fears that in consequence he will be out of a job. Instead, upon returning to his workplace, he finds that it is Alan (as well as Alan's computer-operator sister) who has been fired. Since Lin speaks good English, and had been a computer science major in university, he is employed to manage the Chinese workers and operate the computer. Pleased at this turn of events, it is only when the boss in turn invites him home does Lin realize that his professional promotion has not returned agency to him, but simply placed him in the power of a higher-placed (white Australian) boss. The boss shows Lin pictures of himself in drag and asks for a performance of the orchid fingers, seeming to expect that Lin will replace Alan not only in the office but also sexually. Here, as this realization dawns on Lin and the reader, the story comes to an end. Lin reflects that his position vis-à-vis the boss is an improvement on Alan, but ultimately he remains in a position of dispensability and near-prostitution. The narrator, having previously remarked that Australia is the 'most tolerant country for homosexuals', now remarks with some bitterness that his trials have occurred 'huh, in this most tolerant country for homosexuals'.

What is the image of homosexuality and the politics of this story? On the one hand, the Chinese homosexual characters Xiting and his *jingju* mentor Haifang are largely positive characters, and it is implied that the underlyingly erotic friendship between the two men suits their dispositions; perhaps in a different or future (or past) Chinese society a more overt romantic or legal bond is imagined. Certainly it is depicted more positively than his actual marriage, which Lin was forced into and which is stressful and loveless. There is no sense that either the family's compulsion to arrange Xiting's marriage or the police detention of Haifang, let alone his incarceration, is justified. Implicitly there is a defence of male homosexuality as compatible with Chinese 文 (*wen*) masculinity that has now been sidelined by China's modernization (and perhaps by Western influence).[23]

On the other hand, Alan and 'the boss' are abusing their authority in a way that is proximate to rape and at times crosses that boundary. The narrator is surprisingly unemotional about what has befallen Lin, and this detachment can make it hard to read Lin's misfortune as simply part of a parable of racism in Australia, of his exploitation and humiliation undergone as a result of racist persecution. Nor does Australian society's limited tolerance for homosexuals, to which the white boss in the story is entitled, seem to

do anything to improve Lin's situation. Indeed the festivity of the Mardi Gras Parade which occasions his new employment reads as bitter mockery, given that entering gay circles in Australia leads only to sexual exploitation.

Perhaps the point then is that these rights are not afforded to an Asian immigrant. But this analysis is troubled also by the fact that the most coercive character is not white but Māori, and furthermore by the sarcasm and cruelty that Lin experiences at the hands of other Chinese students with whom he is working. Alan is a further disturbing figure in this reading in that by the end of the story it is he and his sister who are working-class figures out of a job in a society characterized as racist. Alan's dismissal comes not because he has bullied or harassed Lin, but because the boss has lost sexual interest in Alan's coarser charms. In the end the extra space given to personal freedoms for gays in Australia seems to provide little advantage over the police harassment in China – a Chinese homosexual seems condemned to persecution at the hands of the police and his family, and exoticization and abuse in the racist Australian workplace.

Ding Xiaoqi's Finicky Roommate

The third and briefest example is a very short story by Ding Xiaoqi, thanks to early translation the most prominent of these writers in English. Ding arrived in Australia in 1989 and still resides in Melbourne, though she has not published any new writing in recent years. Most of her fiction relates to Chinese women's lives in the 1980s, including all but one of the stories in *Maidenhome*, the English publication of which remains an important example of Australian translation and publishing of Chinese literature.[24] That collection contained 'The Angry Kettle', which had first appeared in a Sydney Chinese newspaper, and was the only Australian text included.[25] The Australian edition of the translation contained a foreword by well-known Australian literary critic Sneja Gunew, hopeful that work such as Ding's would represent 'cross-cultural process' to 'increase and enrich Australian literature as Australians strive to realign themselves nationally and culturally'.[26]

This story was published seven years earlier than 'Orchid Fingers' or 'The Story of Mark' – its time of publication is approximately contemporary with the latter's setting. The story is memorable for its strangeness, which borders on the surreal. On my reading, it contains a much more sublimated response to a white Australian male homosexuality than the other two pieces. Unlike Shi's Mark or Shen's Xiting, there is no explicitly gay character in the story. However, the peculiar behaviour of the Chinese narrator's white Australian housemate is legible as anxiety about homosexuality at the moment of migration occurring simultaneously with the AIDS crisis.

An unnamed and ungendered Chinese narrator and protagonist moves into a shared house with Michael, an Australian lawyer who is from the outset described as peculiarly obsessive about his expensive kettle. Going to view the room as a prospective tenant, they find Michael 'fingering the short, fat spout and playing with the little whatsit on the end of it'.[27] While replacing the little whatsit back on the end of the spout, Michael asks her, 'It's beautiful, isn't it?' The phallic possibilities of spouts on kettles and teapots feature across world literature and demotics hardly need to be emphasized. The stroking, dangling and fishing for compliments and admiration for the 'short, fat spout' press this interpretation upon the reader.

This phallic kettle is both a constant topic of discussion and a source of intense hygienic anxiety for Michael: '"You can use it, but you must keep it clean," Michael generously offered me his kettle, which he was holding in his hand, the day I moved in' (196). The story's crisis also arrives because, according to Michael, the kettle has been 'dirtied', a fact that he announces 'as though he was making a public statement that his beloved had been violated, although it was only a kettle and not a person' (198). The kettle's alleged sullying

(Michael is presumably alleging that the protagonist is responsible) also represents a desecration which is instantly perceived by the narrator as sexual and transgressive.

This leads to the key confrontation, appearing in the following dialogue:

> ‘I haven’t used it,’ I said. ‘I haven’t used it for a long time.’ I congratulated myself on not having even laid a finger on it recently.
> ‘But you’ve dirtied it.’
> ‘I haven’t touched it.’
> ‘But I’ve told you, it has to be kept away from oil, and when you cook, you use oil.’
> ‘It’s at least ten feet away from where I cook.’
> ‘But it isn’t shiny anymore, it’s all blurry.’
> ‘Maybe, but I can’t stop eating just because of that kettle.’
> ‘You could eat a sandwich.’
> ‘But I’m Chinese.’
> ‘Do Chinese people have to eat fried food?’
> ‘Do Australians have to treat their kettles like sweethearts?’
> ‘If you don’t like sandwiches you shouldn’t have come to Australia.’
> ‘If this kettle is worth so much to you, you should take it to bed and hold it tight, not leave it in the kitchen.’
> ‘I will.’

Michelle Yeh highlights the uncertain sexual dynamics of the situation when she notes that the ‘Chinese immigrant in Australia … may or may not be a woman’.[28] There are some early textual clues about the gender of the speaker – we are told for instance that the Australian man (who is certainly annoying because the story opens with ‘To say he was annoying would be unfair’) is ‘the sort of man whose honest, decent appearance would make a woman relax right away’. But since the speaker is far from relaxed throughout the story, perhaps the narrator is in fact a man, unsettled by Michael’s concern to draw lines of racial hygiene. Michael’s constant care taken to polish the spout and the near-surreal taking of the kettle to bed with him suggests that what unsettles the narrator about Michael is his obsession with the phallic kettle, which becomes both a site of possible violation and a companion for his bed. In the time of the AIDS crisis, too, fear of a potentially gay housemate easily transforms into epidemiological anxiety. This in turn makes Michael’s fear of Chinese cooking and its ‘dirtying’ effects legible as anxieties not only as racial but perhaps also sexual hygiene.

Needless to say, this is not the only interpretation afforded by the brief and peculiar text. *Maidenhome* co-translator Cathy Silber attributes the unravelling of the relationship between the narrator and the white Australian to the racism of the dominant society, and characterizes the story as using ‘humor to voice frustration at the expectation dominant cultures place upon immigrants to assimilate’.[29] As ever, the anxieties of migration and of racial mingling – in this case, through cohabitation – often provoke anxieties of hygiene. At the same time, displaced anxieties articulated around the cleanliness of the spout suggest the fearfulness of contagion at the moment of the AIDS crisis are also mingling with the stereotype of gay men as hysterically hygienic.

Conclusions

The 1990s represent a key decade for the reintroduction of homoeroticism in Chinese-language fiction, and for the development of gay and ultimately queer identities. Diaspora, by definition far away from the strictures of home and offering an array of intriguing Others, provided an important location for playing out both sexual and political freedoms. The encounter with the male gay Other in these stories contains a subtext of exploring the

legitimate scope of individual rights – what attitude should be taken to the freedoms afforded to personal sexual agency in Australia is, for these writers, intimately related to the question of how a politically free society could or should function. The setting of 1990s Australia, at the time much easier for Chinese migrants to reach than the United States or Western Europe, also means that the Chinese characters doing the observing are from a less privileged and educated class background than their counterparts elsewhere. There is an everyman quality and perhaps even a hint of the claim to universality in these stories – any reader might themselves encounter a homosexual.

In these stories, however, homosexuality remains an external and 'foreign' phenomenon, and part of the questions arising from an encounter with a freer and racially exotic society. Australia's own slow acceptance of open homosexuality meant that these encounters occurred at a moment when Australian society was working through the questions of homosexual behaviour and ultimately the consecration of identities and relationships as inalienable individual rights. Chinese authors and readers are conscious of the affordances and limits of political freedoms, and the broken promise of equality: here is the individual freed and at least technically licenced, and nevertheless the result is inequality and oppression that some white Australians might also be subject to (and to which gay Chinese migrants would doubly or triply be subject to). Here, the old leftist critique of the decay of the bourgeoisie, emblematized by rampant sexuality, is available but never really mobilized by writers or narrators. The presence of sympathy mixed with doubt (but without disgust) means these texts have much to contribute not only to global narratives of Chinese(-language) queer identities but also to the reasonably well-known story worlds of Asian-Australian queer voices writing in English.

Perhaps more importantly, character traits in this story appear to be distributed across the characters without reference to orientation. Mark may have a weakness of character, but he is essentially a victim of the system, as Xiting, albeit in a more violent and lamentable fashion, is too. As in much of the Anglophone writing of the period, the frisson of homoeroticism has been replaced with a focus on sexual behaviour and an analysis of the sociopolitical position. For the Tiananmen generation, Australia offered political freedom. The sociopolitical position of homosexuals appears in these writings as a logical part of such a system, but the stance of the authors seems to vacillate between sympathy for homosexuals as victims of intolerance (despite the claims of liberal democracy), warning about the depredations of Western permissiveness, and fears about encounters with the abject homosexual in the midst of the AIDS crisis.

Notes

1 Jennifer Wayne Cushman, 'A "Colonial Casualty": The Chinese Community in Australian Historiography', *Asian Studies Association of Australia. Review* 7, no. 3 (1984): 100–13.

2 Mei-fen Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia: Urban Elites, Newspapers and the Formation of Chinese Australian Identity, 1892–1912* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013); Shee Ping Wong, *The Poison of Polygamy: A Social Novel*, trans. Ely Finch (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2019); Bolin Hu, 'Reporting China: Chinese-Language Newspapers and Diasporic Chinese Identity in Australia, 1931–1937', *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 17, no. 1 (2021): 84–116; Nathan Daniel Gardner, 'United We Stood but Divided We Were: Chinese Australian Unity and the 1984 Immigration Debate', *History Australia* 19, no. 2 (2022): 305–24.

3 Wanning Sun, Audrey Yue, John Sinclair and Jia Gao, 'Diasporic Chinese Media in Australia: A Post-2008 Overview', *Continuum* 25, no. 4 (2011): 515–27; Haiqing Yu and Wanning Sun, 'WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs) in Australia: A Political Economy Account of Chinese-language Digital/Social media', *Media International Australia* 179, no. 1 (2021): 96–112; Fran Martin, *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women*

Students in the West (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Elija Cassidy and Wilfred Yang Wang, 'Gay Men's Digital Cultures beyond Gaydar and Grindr: LINE Use in the Gay Chinese Diaspora of Australia', *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 6 (2018): 851–65.

4 There remains much to be done on the Cold War period, which is not a wasteland of Chinese-language material, *belles lettres* or otherwise. With greater incentives to focus on the origins of Chinese Australia and its recent past, we find ourselves with a lacuna in research on the Chinese-language materials in between. Wong, *The Poison of Polygamy.*

5 Anne McLaren, 'Australia as Dystopia: Recent Mainland Chinese Writing in Australia', *Otherland Literary Journal* 7 (2001): 193–205; Kam Louie, 'Australian Lovers: Chingchong Chinaman, Chinese Identity and Hybrid Confusion', in *Double Vision: Asian Accounts of Australia*, ed. Alison Broinowski (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004), 61–78; J. Bruce Jacobs and Yu Ouyang, eds., *Bitter Peaches and Plums: Two Chinese Novellas on the Recent Chinese Student Experience in Australia* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 1995); Paul Sheehan, *Among the Barbarians: The Dividing of Australia* (Sydney: Random House, 1998), 58–65, 216–17.

6 Xi Rang Liu, 'Chinese-Australian Fiction: A Hybrid Narrative of the Chinese Diaspora in Australia', PhD diss., University of Tasmania, 2007; Wenche Ommundsen, 'Transnational (Il)literacies: Reading the "New Chinese Literature in Australia" in China', *Antipodes* 25, no. 1 (2011): 83–9; Qiuping Lu, 'Representations of Misogyny in Diasporic Chinese Australian Writing', PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2021.

7 Tandee Wang, 'Australia's Tiananmen Generation: Politics, the Public and Posterity', Honours diss., Australian National University, 2020.

8 Edmund SK Fung and Chen Jie, 'Changing Perceptions: The Attitudes of the PRC Chinese towards Australia and China, 1989–1996', Australia-Asia Paper, Griffith University, 1996, 5.

9 Though outside the scope of this article, another noteworthy appearance of Sydney Mardi Gras in Sinophone fiction deserves notice: in the Taiwanese author Li Kotomi's recent novel *Dancing Solo*, the protagonist Norie participates in the Mardi Gras parade but subsequently attempts suicide in the Blue Mountains. Her despair seems at least partly provoked by the obligatory positivity and festivity of homosexuality, which she cannot reconcile with her own darker experience.

10 Dennis Altman, 'The Most Political of Diseases', in *AIDS in Australia*, ed. Eric Timewell, Victor Minichiello and David Plummer (Sydney: Prentice Hall, 1992), 69.

11 One factor diminishing recoverability of reception is that Chinese migrants and students may still find themselves circumspect, since even recent research can find a queer Chinese international student recording that 'he got himself into trouble with his parents by posting pictures of Mardi Gras on WeChat moments in his first year in Sydney. They cautioned him against "decadent Western lifestyle like homosexuality" and he had to give them the assurance that he was just a curious passer-by of the parade' (Haiqing Yu and Hayden Blain, 'Tongzhi on the Move: Digital/Social Media and Placemaking Practices among Young Gay Chinese in Australia', *Media International Australia* 173, no. 1 (2019): 74.).

12 All translations from the Chinese are my known, except where noted.

13 Like most Sinophone texts of the period, these stories use the terms 'homosexual' 同性戀 (adj. and noun) and 'homosexual' 同性戀者 (noun). Terms such as 'queer' were not yet in circulation at the time, and the adoption of such terms by those outside the community has occurred even more recently. Although analysis using 'queer' or similar terms would be possible, the anachronism doesn't seem to add much, especially where the characters involved are all (or can be read as) cis gay men.

14 Jacobs, and Ouyang, *Bitter Peaches and Plums,* v.

15 Louie, 'Australian Lovers', 65–6.

16 I have not yet encountered Sinophone Australian depictions of other queer subjects, such as lesbians, trans people or bisexuals, in this period.

17 Indeed, I am not aware of any queer-identifying writers in the sizable corpus of Sinophone fiction about Australia since the 1980s. On the other hand, Anglophone Chinese Australian writing has several prominent examples – Willam Yang, Tony Ayres, Benjamin Law, Andy Quan, Shelley Parker-Chan, Lia Incognita, etc. Ayres (1999) offers instructive background reading, especially as regards Shen's story, since Ayres sketches in a critical but personal way some of the racial dynamics of being Chinese, gay and in Australia at the same time, although from the perspective of someone who migrated to Australia in early childhood.

18 Guoying Shi 施國英, 'Tong Aozhou Xiren jiehun xingfu ma?' 同澳洲西人結婚幸福嗎 in *Aodaliya xin Huaren wenxue wenhua yanjiu ziliao xuan*, ed. Qian Chaoying (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 2002), 143–8.

19 Hong Xiao [Lily Lee] 蕭虹, 'Xu', in *Tamen meiyou aiqing* 她們沒有愛情, ed. Xin Qianbo 辛千波 [Temple Qin] (Harris Park, NSW: Moreink, 1998), 5.

20 Guoying Shi 施國英, 'Make de gushi' 馬克的故事 in *Tamen meiyou aiqing* 她們沒有愛情, ed. Xin Qianbo 辛千波 [Temple Qin] (Harris Park, NSW: Moreink, 1998), 143.

21 Assuming strict historicity and that both Mark's friends were elected as ALP members, this places the story during ALP's opposition in NSW between 1991 and 1995, probably towards the beginning of that period, since White's death occurred in September 1990.

22 One can here perhaps discern the influence of the film 東宮西宮 (*Donggong xigong*, *East Palace, West Palace*, 1996), which references *jingju* and concerns the persecution of homosexuals cruising in parks; or of the 王小波Wang Xiaobo story on which it is based.

23 A part of this treatment is the 男旦 (*nandan*) trope – we are in the same decade and territory as Chen Kaige's 霸王別姬 (*Bawang bieji*; *Farewell My Concubine*, 1993) – a theatrical practice that had become available in Chinese and Western discourse to signal homosexuality, usually unlocking a tragic story surrounding its practitioners. For a critique of the use of *nandan* in this way, much of which could also apply to Shen's treatment, see Chao Guo, *Chinese Traditional Theatre and Male Dan: Social Power, Cultural Change and Gender Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

24 Winner of the 1994 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards' Dinny O'Hearn/SBS Book Show Prize for Literary Translation and commended by *The Age*, few Australian translations of Chinese literature have received comparable attention. The book was subsequently also published in the United States and in Dutch translation (from English).

25 Ding also wrote some dramas which were performed but apparently not published, and I am informed that she no longer holds copies. Ouyang Yu gives the titles of her plays as *Gateway to Paradise* and *Kiss Yesterday Goodbye*. *Gateway to Paradise* 'tells the story of a group of young Chinese students who come to Australia dreaming of making a fortune but quickly become disillusioned' (Yu Ouyang, 'Land of Strangers', *Independent Monthly* (February 1994): 81). Understanding those productions, which apparently were performed by 'Chinese-language Gold Mountain Theatre Group' (Chris Berry, and Ding Xiaoqi, 'Interview with Ding Xiaoqi', *Modern Chinese Literature* 7, no. 2 (1993): 109) would require an oral history, rather than a strictly literary project.

26 The story's original Chinese (Ding, Xiaoqi丁小琦. 'Fennu de shuihu' 憤怒的水壺 [The Angry Kettle] *Huasheng bao* 華聲報. 20 September 1991, p. 18.) version is difficult to access, having appeared in a Sydney Chinese newspaper now usually available only on microfiche, but the English version was published in both American and Australian editions. Given the difficulty of access, I would be happy to provide a scan of the

original upon request. My thanks on this matter to Jessie Ye Su and Sophia Huei-ling Chen. (Sneja Gunew, ‘Foreword’, in *Maidenhome*, ed. Ding Xiaoqi (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1993), ix.)

27 Quotes from ‘The Angry Kettle’ are from the published translation, by Chris Berry. Page numbers are from the US edition, but researchers should note that the paratexts are different in the two editions. (Ding Xiaoqi, *Maidenhome* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1994), 195.)

28 Incidentally, the comical paratextual sketches accompanying ‘The Angry Kettle’ depict the narrator as a woman. Michelle Yeh, ‘Review of *Maidenhome*’, *World Literature Today* 70, no. 4 (1996): 1026.

29 Cathy Silber, ‘Foreword’, in *Maidenhome ,* ed. Ding Xiaoqi (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1994), xiv.

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Chapter 8

LIVING IN/WITH AMBIGUITY: 'PASSING' IN MU CAO'S *IN THE FACE OF DEATH WE ARE ALL EQUAL*

Rebecca Ehrenwirth

In his literary works, such as his poems and his novel, the contemporary Chinese writer Mu Cao (b. 1974) focuses on the doubly marginalized, i.e. queer migrant workers, and vividly portrays Chinese society today. Although his depiction is often brutally frank, his 2003 novel 弃儿 *Qi'er*[1] (*In the Face of Death We Are All Equal*) is also about passing, i.e. pretending to be something or someone else. In fact, the intersectionality of 'sexual passing' with 'class passing' is skilfully portrayed in *Qi'er* as Mu Cao uses different narrative perspectives in order to allow the reader to see through the act of 'passing' itself. The various narrative voices that Mu Cao creates open up the characters to the readers in ways that not only show the constructedness of their identities but also reveal some of the difficulties that contemporary society in China is facing. These narrative voices furthermore emphasize that the characters are made 'the other' by social settings which they cannot escape no matter how hard they try. For this analysis I will use close reading and draw on the narrative theory developed by Gérard Genette[2] to discuss selected passages from *Qi'er*[3] with particular reference to the concept of 'passing'.

The reason why I use the ideas developed by Genette as structural guidance for this chapter is because, on the one hand, Genette's differentiation between the *narrator*, or the person who speaks (voice), and the *focalizer*, or the person who sees (vision), permits us to attain, at the level of discourse, a clearer understanding of the narrating characters. Thanks to the different narrators and focalizers in the novel, readers of *Qi'er* not only get to 'hear' the story, but also get to 'see' it through the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Furthermore, using Genette's narrative theory allows a shift in perspective. In *Qi'er* the 'abnormal' acquire a voice and a vision, thus unmasking the 'normal' as hypocritical and untrue to themselves. Genette's theoretical framework is a helpful tool for the analysis of *Qi'er* because it allows us to unfold the complexity of 'being queer' in contemporary China as portrayed in the novel. At the same time, however, I want to point out that the application of Genette's theory calls into question the very binaries on which it is based and draw attention to the fact that there might be something in-between or in addition to homo- and hetero-(diegetic), i.e. queer.

Qi'er is an outstanding example of queer Chinese-language literature because Mu Cao does not shy away from confronting the reader with the experiences of doubly marginalized individuals on the one hand, and brutality up to sexual perversion on the other. However, Mu Cao not only 'disrupts' or 'shocks' the readers with the story's content, but also by how the story is told. Through the narratological analysis of *Qi'er*, i.e. by disentangling the various narrative voices and perspectives of the novel, we can see that the bizarreness of the story is mirrored in the narrative structure of the novel.

Constructed identities

Originally, the term ‘passing’ was used to refer to ‘passing’ as belonging to a race one did not in fact belong to.[4] I use ‘passing’ here, however, in Erving Goffman’s sense, who defines it as a concealment of any potentially ‘stigmatizing’ aspect of personality.[5] A stigma can in turn be defined as something that is regarded as a ‘weakness’ by dominant social standards. Goffman differentiates between ‘discredited’ and ‘discreditable’ stigmas, i.e. those which are more obvious/visible, such as race or physical disabilities, and those which can be covered up, such as sexual orientations, poverty or illness.[6] What is seen as ‘normal’ and what as not (i.e. stigma) is thereby always relative to the context and defined by the socio-political environment. The characters in *Qi’er* try to cover up different stigmas, thus making use of various forms of ‘passing’: they pass as straight – out of fear and shame of losing face, or sometimes out of necessity, because it simply makes their lives easier; they want to pass as middle-class, because they no longer want to be seen as worthless and disposable. However, what Mu Cao reveals is that most of the characters break under the societal pressure instead of taking on masks permanently and trying to pass as something or someone else, especially those in the lowest social class. Because they feel that they have to ‘construct’ their identities along the lines of said society and according to its rules, they must in the end collapse under the stress, since they do not fit into society’s pattern.

Since the major characters in *Qi’er* try to stay true to themselves, being neither able nor willing to hide their own identity completely, the societal pressure often leads to their tragic deaths. While they try to fabricate their identities along a given pattern, they neither convince others nor themselves that they belong within that pattern of ‘normality’. Therefore, *Qi’er* can be considered ‘queer,’ i.e. non-normative, in different ways: the ‘queerness’ does not come only from the ‘queer voices’, i.e. those characters portrayed in the novel who can be seen as ‘queer’ as they do not conform to cultural norms around sexuality,[7] but also from the ‘strangeness’, the uncanny, the sometimes gruesome portrayal of (queer) sexual encounters. Hongwei Bao has characterized Mu Cao as a representative of something different because Mu Cao ‘disrupts’,[8] for instance by his explicit depiction of public cruising, therefore also distancing himself from the ‘increasingly gentrified homosexual community in China’,[9] while Mu Cao also vividly portrays characters who are not middle-class, not ‘normal’ enough.

The major characters in the novel are He Donghai 何东海, A Qing 阿青, Little Jade 小玉, Little Tough 小强, Little Thing 小东西, Little Fairy 小妖精 and Little Devil 小鬼.[10] I call them ‘major characters’ because the novel is, indeed, not principally about the I-narrator, He Donghai, alone, but also about these other characters: young, queer migrant workers who are trying to find companionship.[11] He Donghai and A Qing are also the main characters, however, because the story revolves around their lives; everything is connected to them. They all struggle to find themselves and live a decent life. In order for them to do that, they feel that they have to ‘construct’ their identities along the lines of social norms and values, which dictate ‘normal’, (i.e. heteronormative) sexual desires and having a decent job. To them, however, finding a good employment and earning money not only means living according to societal rules but also being independent and escaping a life of poverty in the countryside, having the opportunity to live out their sexual desires and fulfil their longing for partnership.[12] Therefore, the city becomes their desired location, away from the confined space of a village, where they can stroll through the parks and meet other queer people. In reality, this escape from the countryside enables them not only to live out their (sexual) desires under the cloak of the city’s anonymity but also to acquire a livelihood. Theoretically, in the city, where no one knows them (and they know no one, except one another), it will be easier for them to pass as ‘normal’; their goal of socio-economic independence and status becomes more attainable to them.

Yet it is also the city that destroys them. In the city they become faceless migrant workers, who are seen as worthless. Once the scene shifts to Zhengzhou, the reader begins to see things from the perspective of one of the characters (A Qing) as the focalizer. From this perspective the reader sees that ‘it was just a street full of migrant workers whom no

one cared about'.[13] They get cheated out of their hard-earned salaries after months of work and are exploited as well as abused by most of their bosses.[14] In addition to that, even the treatment by the police, the ones who are supposedly there to serve and protect, is brutal and inhuman as they verbally and physically abuse the migrant workers. Although the migrant workers need it the most, protection and shelter are denied to them, because they are at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy:

> He [A Qing] wasn't asleep long … before he was kicked awake by someone. Opening his eyes in panic, he saw it was a police officer … 'Get up! Up! Up! Outside! You can't sleep in the ticket lobby!' … After the ticket lobby was cleared out by the police, the unemployed vagrants of the migrant-worker tribe went outside and stood under the eaves of the railway station. The heartless rain continued to fall, heartlessly.[15]

This harassment by the police serves only one purpose: to clear the city's streets of the weak and poor (低端人口 *diduan renkou*) in order to create an immaculate picture of society. Clearing the streets is another form of 'passing', one in which the city tries to look perfect by removing the 'garbage', i.e. the migrant workers and the poor people.[16] Even when the migrant workers actively turn to the police for help because they fear for their lives, the police chief rather insults them: '"… there's not a good one among them [the migrant workers]! Bunch of thieves and swindlers – human scum, every last one! They deserve to be sold to a black factory. Saves us a lot of trouble that way!"'[17] For the police and for society they are a burden: one which society needs to be rid of. Even when A Qing turns to a local newspaper for help after one of his boss refuses to give him and his companions wages and identity cards, he is turned down by the journalist, because such things happen every day.[18] This emphasizes that society as a whole is not willing to do anything about the problems that migrant workers are faced with, because it does not concern the majority of said society; it is a problem of the marginalized, 'the others', those who do not deserve any help or attention.

The city is a conundrum to the characters: on the one hand, in the city they can earn a living; on the other hand it brings death to many of them. The city means fear but also money, which is the only way out of their misery. In order to be accepted by the city, they need to adapt to it and to learn to 'pass' as 'urban people'; they need to look like they belong to the city, that is, they need to have money: 'He [Little Tough] laughed bitterly, then felt the wallet in his pocket. No longer was he human scum! He could walk into any hotel in the city and be welcomed!'[19] After selling his kidney, Little Tough finally feels like he is somebody, like he belongs to the city, because he has some money in his pocket. Tormented by nightmares about his friend Little Thing drowning in a lake after saving a rich man's wife and trying to find her precious necklace,[20] he turns to drugs to numb his pain. Through Little Tough as a focalizer, the reader comes to see that no matter how hard these migrant workers try, they can never rid themselves of their (rural) origins. They were all raised by a particular place: their hometown in the countryside.[21]

Moreover, they are not only vulnerable outsiders because they are migrant workers but also because they are attracted to people of the same sex: 'A number of gay guys in the circle had spoken of the way that plainclothes police officers seduced, beat, and extorted money from homosexuals.'[22] Therefore, they are careful to hide their homosexuality when dealing with the police, while revealing themselves to their companions and comrades (*tongzhi*) because they need to form alliances. They can only survive because they have each other. But despite their greatest efforts, they are, in the end, unable to save one another: his friends cannot save Little Wave from being beaten to death by a ruthless boss; Little Tough cannot rescue Little Thing from drowning in the lake; Little Tough cannot be saved from running into a burning building in search of his drugs after rescuing a child; A Qing cannot gather enough money to pay for Little Jade to go to the hospital for treatment

of his sexually transmitted diseases; and He Donghai cannot save A Qing from his parent's selfishness.

That society is cruel and does not sympathize with these marginalized individuals is clearly illustrated by a remark made by one of the people holding them captive (Crow) in the black factory in which they work: '"Too bad you were born in the wrong body."'[23] By saying 'body' Crow is not only referring to their physical bodies, hinting at the fact that they are not women, who would perhaps receive more mercy, but also their social bodies – those of migrant workers. In their profound pain and suffering, they become the objects of society's voyeurism. This is plainly illustrated by the fact that, when Little Jade stands on the roof of a hotel to commit suicide, people think it is performance art.[24] People remain just passive bystanders even in the moments in which their help is needed most: 'A large building had caught fire, and its crying, screaming inhabitants were desperately trying to crawl out to the streets. A crowd of onlookers gathered around to gawk breathlessly at the sight just as if they'd been watching a holiday firework display.'[25] At the same time, society is also driven by capitalism and the yearning for money: When A Qing lies bleeding on the ground after a car accident, people walk by him, because he is not 'anyone they knew'.[26] Instead of helping the casualties, they rather pick up the apples which have fallen from the car. Only money can finally convince an old man to free A Qing and the driver from under the freight car and bring them to a hospital.

The major characters all strive to move up socially but their attempts to do so are literally demolished by the state. In order to broaden the street, Little Jade's and A Qing's barbershop is torn down in Zhengzhou after only one year. While becoming a money boy[27]/sex worker or selling blood/organs is seen as the lowest one could possibly fall, it proves to be the last resort for people from the countryside in order to survive because they cannot expect any support otherwise, neither from the state nor from society. Despite his best efforts, Little Jade must prostitute himself in order to make some money. Not only must he endure the abuse of his boss, but he also gets syphilis and gonorrhea and spends all his money on an unethical doctor in one of the STD clinics.[28] The fact that an entire village contracted AIDS from selling blood, which the Party so gloriously calls '*contributing* blood',[29] draws attention to the fact that these ways of making a living are not only degrading but also dangerous and lead, indeed, to the very opposite of a 'living', i.e. death.

Questions of representation and narrative theory

Carrying out a narratological analysis of the novel, i.e. identifying who sees and who speaks according to Genette's definition, helps us to understand the complexity of the story, as well as of the reality on which the story is based. As Susan Lanser has pointed out, 'queer narratologies have worked with a canon that is much too narrow.'[30] A study of Mu Cao's works, who is considered a 'folk poet'[31] because he not only writes *about* ordinary people but also *for* them, can help to expand this canon. Growing up in the countryside in Henan Province, he worked several odd jobs, which enables him to vividly portray the Chinese working class in his literary works. Bao paints a picture of Mu Cao's 'dilemma': Since he openly writes about gay and queer experiences, it is difficult for him to find a publisher in China, let alone reach the general Chinese public. On the other hand, for LGBTQ+ people in urban China his works seem to be too 'working class'.[32] However, his works are not only outstanding because of their content but also because of their style: alternating narrative voices, magic realism and the 'in-your-face' and sometimes 'perverse' depictions of sexual acts are what make his writing unique.

Although Genette's terminology, comprising such terms as homo- and heterodiegetic, seems all too perfect for the analysis of queer texts, the terms in fact have nothing to do with sex or sexuality but refer to whether the narrators themselves are part of the story (homodiegetic) or not (heterodiegetic). In *Qi'er* one finds both and sometimes it is even

difficult to decide whether one of these terms applies. The novel begins with He Donghai, who tells his life-story from a first-person point-of-view (homo-/autodiegetic).[33] In the course of the tale, however, it switches to a third-person narration,[34] in which the narrator is clearly not part of the story (heterodiegetic). Furthermore, throughout the novel, there are also several second-person sections, which are not only rarely used in novels in general but also hard to define, as there are different types of second-person narration.[35] Not only does the point of view[36] continually shift between first-, second- and third-person throughout the novel, the focus of attention also shifts between the various major characters. Furthermore, the minor characters, such as Little Wave, Xia Nanshan, Dr Hua, Little Lotus, Little Chrys, Little Orchid and Seventh Brother, who are mainly portrayed by the anonymous heterodiegetic third-person narrator, also add to the multiplicity of perspectives.

The first chapter of the novel starts with a first-person account, that of He Donghai, who self-characterizes himself to the reader as a middle-aged (almost sixty years old), homosexual man, who is looking back on his life shortly before retiring from a crematorium in Beijing in which he has worked all his life. Not only does he talk about himself as not being normal,[37] he also talks about his efforts to pass as normal, instead of loving his necrophile co-worker Xia Nanshan. After Xia Nanshan 'leaves him' he even gets married to a woman, whom he barely knows, solely to pass as straight and to overcome his love for someone who ignores him. Since He Donghai is the focalizer in the first-person accounts, the reader learns about his feelings and thoughts directly from him: 'I did my best to think about women, about bad women, whorish women. And yet, my gaze remained glued to Xia Nanshan's body … I looked at Xia Nanshan and felt anger, hatred, sadness! … How could I love someone like that?'[38] In his reflections on Xia Nanshan, He Donghai does not condemn him for being a necrophile. Rather, he compares himself and his longing for Xia Nanshan with this latter's own rarer paraphilia:

> He [Xia Nanshan] was not sick, and I wasn't normal either! … I took Xia Nanshan into my arms and pressed my lips against his. He gave no reaction, so I started to caress him. Every organ in his body froze and it seemed as though I myself were attempting to make love to a corpse. Was I a necrophile, too?[39]

Xia Nanshan, however, does not miss any opportunity to leave He Donghai under the impression that it is him who is 'abnormal': '"Why aren't you attracted to women, Little He? … Why don't I report you for sodomy while we're at it?"'[40]

Although Xia Nanshan dismisses He Donghai's love for him and treats him as inferior, He Donghai cannot forget him, not even after Xia Nanshan marries Dr Hua,[41] a female presumed dead who comes back to life in the crematorium when Xia Nanshan has sex with her. Years later, after He Donghai's divorce, when he is out cruising for sex in a park, he finally finds a (sexual) partner who looks 'just like Xia Nanshan' and who even shares the same surname – Xia.[42] After He Donghai and Teacher Xia spend some time together, during which the I-narrator describes the sex that they have together but also his disturbing dreams about Teacher Xia and Xia Nanshan becoming one person in the morgue and himself turning into Dr Hua, Teacher Xia breaks up with him in order to live a 'normal' life: '"I can't keep going this way! I want to get married, have a child. That's the only way people will see us as normal!"'[43] Teacher Xia's statement reveals that he feels forced to pass, because society will not accept gay people like them. For Teacher Xia the passing quickly becomes inseparable from identifying, even if this means hiding what is actually his true identity. When He Donghai comes to his wedding a month after their break-up and tries to seduce him, Teacher Xia punches him. 'Teacher Xia pulled a handkerchief that I had once given him from his pocket and wiped the [He Donghai's] blood off his cock. Then he tossed the bloody cloth to the ground, turned his back to me, and walked away.'[44] Teacher Xia shows his disrespect and disapproval of his former lover and his advances not just by

turning his back on him, leaving the injured and broken-hearted He Donghai alone, but also by throwing his present (the handkerchief) to the ground.

After an attempted suicide, the story jumps to He Donghai on his sixtieth birthday fifteen years later. He Donghai is waiting for 'his kids', 'his little angels', referring to the six major characters. Although the frame narration appears at first glance to be that of a homodiegetic I-narrator, there are several instances in which a heterodiegetic narrator comes to shatter this impression. For example, when the narrator suddenly speaks directly to the reader saying 'Listen! You can practically hear the whole thing [Little Devil's penis] enter at once.'[45]; or when information is added that the I-narrator clearly could not know.[46] I will call the I-narration the 'frame narration' because all the other stories are somewhat imbedded in, or connected to, He Donghai's account. Whereas the reader hears and sees the main characters' stories from the inside, minor characters, such as Xia Nanshan and Dr Hua, are mostly portrayed from an outside point-of-view: In these cases, it is either the homodiegetic I-narrator or the heterodiegetic third-person narrator who speaks. It is mainly a matter of an external focalization because the reader rarely gets to know about these characters' feelings and emotions. Seeing them only from the outside (rarely from the inside – their own point of view) also highlights their fabricated facade, which the reader is able to see through. Within the story, however, they successfully maintain their charade, vis-à-vis society, of being a 'normal' family. Not only is the marriage of Xia Nanshan and Dr Hua[47] at the beginning of the novel an act of 'passing'; it also helps Xia to keep up his mask of normality: Although Xia Nanshan is 'terrified of her'[48] and despises Dr Hua for her unattractiveness, marrying her means 'being normal' and climbing the social ladder – given that she is a surgeon while he is a clandestine necrophile from a poor family. Together they move from Beijing to Zhengzhou in Henan Province, the central region of the PRC. When Dr Hua becomes pregnant, she is delighted, while Xia Nanshan feels 'more and more melancholy'.[49] He asks himself: '"Was it conceived when we had sex in the crematorium morgue?"'[50] and his dead mother begins to appear in his dreams, telling him that she is going to be reincarnated. It is only when his child becomes thematic that Xia Nanshan takes on the role of the focalizer (internal focalization); but this just highlights his obsession with wanting to seem 'normal'.

The child that they are about to have is doomed from the very start. Although the boy looks like Xia Nanshan, his father cannot form any kind of attachment to him. When the baby cries, Xia Nanshan believes he hears him calling his name in the voice of his (Xia Nanshan's) mother – the first moment of magic realism in the novel. Dr Hua too feels that their boy is abnormal: '"Our child is so strange! … He hasn't cried once since he was born; he just laughs and laughs. So odd!"'[51] When Dr Hua hears her son scream her own name, she agrees with Xia Nanshan that they cannot keep this 'inauspicious child'.[52] This 'freak'[53] disrupts their normality, so they have to get rid of him. One winter's night, they abandon the little baby at Zhengzhou Railway Station. While Xia Nanshan is clearly happy to have 'dump[ed] this child',[54] for Dr Hua it is a hard thing to bear. Weeping, she places a red, heart-shaped stone around the baby's neck: a stone which they had found during their honeymoon and which she had made Xia Nanshan give to her as an expression of his love for her. In these instances, Dr Hua becomes the focalizer and the reader sees her as more humane than her husband. Their abandoned baby grows up to become A Qing, one of the main characters (if not *the* main character) of the novel. His story, as well as the stories of five other characters, is presented from different points-of-view and perspectives: namely, through He Donghai's first-person account, through the third-person heterodiegetic narrator, and in second-person passages. This not only makes the stories more multi-dimensional, as the reader is able to see and hear different sides, including the characters' thoughts and feelings, from their own perspective (internal focalization); it also serves to indicate that they do indeed stay true to themselves. The *you*-passages, for their part, not only enable the reader to identify with the characters; they also serve, since they focus on each character individually, the function of giving each of the characters a voice (or better a

vision) through which they can express their thoughts and emotions as focalizers in their own stories. However, the question remains: Whose voice is telling their stories?

The 'passing' narrator

In the case of Little Fairy (ch. 3), Little Thing (ch. 5), Little Devil (ch. 7) and Little Jade (ch. 11), their *you*-narrations are all embedded within the I-narration (frame narration). The I-narrator is clearly connected with the you-passages by several textual devices, such as He Donghai's introductions, using words like ' … I listened to his [Little Devil's] story'[55] before the narration shifts to the second-person, or comments, added after the second-person account, 'When Little Jade got to this part of the story [which he was telling me], his eyes filled with tears.'[56] These second-person passages come across as (interior) memory monologues,[57] in which the respective protagonists look back on their own lives. There is, therefore, a temporal gap between the narrating-*you* and the experiencing-*you*.[58] It remains nonetheless possible, at least on the one hand, to see Little Fairy, Little Thing, Little Devil and Little Jade as homodiegetic narrators, since they are telling their own stories: stories of a past of which they are also a part. This would mean that these are their voices telling their own respective stories in narratives addressed to themselves. In the first instance, indeed, this is even emphasized, with Little Fairy telling his own story initially from a first-person point-of-view, only to then switch to the second-person: '"My hometown is Zhangjiajie, in Hunan Province," Little Fairy began. Lying in my arms, he told me his story. In your first year of middle school you had a classmate named Little Wei.'[59] On the other hand, one could also argue that in these instances He Donghai remains the narrator, switching from the first- to the second-person, and (re)tells Little Fairy's, Little Thing's, Little Devil's and Little Jade's stories to them, thus turning from a homodiegetic into a heterodiegetic narrator. He would, in other words, lend them his voice to (re)tell their stories.

Here is where, in my opinion, Genette's binaries are called into question, since Genette suggests that second-person narrations belong to heterodiegesis[60]: The *you*-passages are full of details, with direct monologue and vivid memories. In four out of six cases they stand in some connection to the I-narrator. It almost feels, therefore, as if the heterodiegetic narrator and the *you* of the story told become one and the same person; the narrator becomes ambiguous. The narrator does not appear to leave anything out. They know as much as the protagonist of the story can know in hindsight. It seems as if the narrator is part of the story as a character (homodiegetic) but the way in which the stories are embedded in the I-narration makes it implausible that they are addressing their stories to themselves while they are in the presence of He Donghai. Therefore, it seems more likely that He Donghai is (re)telling their stories (heterodiegetically) to them, turning the characters into the listeners of their own stories. That is to say, he is a heterodiegetic narrator trying to pass as homodiegetic. In this way, He Donghai is not only an eyewitness to these characters' later destinies; he also turns into the earwitness, as well as the storyteller, of the stories of their younger selves. This is a further expression of his role as a father figure and guardian of their lives and life stories. Because he knows them so well, he can speak in their voices. He can pass as them. He Donghai morphs into them or they morph into him; the homo- becomes the heterodiegetic and the other way round.[61]

Unlike the others, He Donghai and Little Tough did not meet individually but were introduced to one another by their mutual friends A Qing and Little Jade. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether it is He Donghai or an anonymous heterodiegetic narrator who tells his story in Chapter 9. They never shared an intimate moment in which Little Tough might have told his story or have let He Donghai retell his story to him. Therefore, it is also not embedded in the I-narration but stands alone without any introduction or comment by the I-narrator. The second-person narration in Chapter 9 is an account of

horrendous sexual abuse involving Little Tough's own grandmother (Nai Nai) told in what appears to be Little Tough's own voice.[62] He experiences his father as weak and his mother as cruel. He feels abandoned by his parents and left alone: 'Everywhere you looked, parents holding umbrellas were bringing their children to school, but not once had either of your parents seen you off or picked you up.'[63] It is only in the arms of other men that he finds the love and companionship he longs for – at first with his childhood friend Little Wave,[64] later with a stranger (Little Geng).[65]

It is that companionship and intimacy that all the major characters are craving. In the rare cases in which the characters had found exactly that, it was taken away from them, as Uncle Ma was taken away from Little Fairy. In his *you*-narration, Little Fairy reflects on his parents and his relationship with Uncle Ma, the father of his classmate, Little Wei. While he describes his father as 'cruel' and his mother as 'a stranger' from time to time,[66] he starts an intimate relationship with Uncle Ma. In his fantasy he begins comparing his father to Uncle Ma: 'He [Uncle Ma] kissed your delicate skin with his burning lips and you suddenly felt that you had come home. You recalled that your father had never kissed you.'[67] After Little Fairy and Uncle Ma are caught in the act by his wife, Little Fairy's father almost beats him to death, calling his own son a 'filthy animal'.[68] In an attempt to kill himself, Little Fairy burns half of his body. It is not his own family but Uncle Ma who comes to the hospital to care for him and who even leaves his family for Little Fairy. When Uncle Ma has an accident and dies, Little Fairy is left with nothing, because their relationship has no legal protection.[69] This also draws attention to the precarious situation that same-sex partnerships are in. In the PRC, same-sex couples do not share the same legal protection as heterosexual couples and the Marriage Law of the PRC still defines marriage as a union between man and woman.[70] As a consequence, Little Fairy becomes a drifter and ends up meeting He Donghai.

He Donghai's relationship to the six characters is complex: Whereas with some of them he shares intimate moments and also has sex, he still regards them as 'his kids', which implies paedophiliac tendencies. He seems to like his role as a caregiver and keeper of their life stories; but he also longs for their (romantic) love as well as for their bodies. After Little Fairy tells him his story, he reflects: 'I wasn't his Uncle Ma, but I felt I could love him just as his Uncle Ma had.'[71] Their relationships to one another oscillate between sexual desire, platonic love and parental affection. He Donghai's feelings for A Qing are certainly the strongest, probably because he subconsciously knows that A Qing is Xia Nanshan's son.[72] His story is (re)told in Chapter 13, without any introduction or comment by the I-narrator, but preceded by a meeting between the two. The I-narrator's interior monologue reveals that he clearly knows more than the reader does: 'I kept wondering to myself: What would the child of a twenty-five-year-old homosexual and a forty-five-year-old prostitute be like?'[73] Although the reader knows at that point already that he is referring to A Qing and Sister Plum Blossom, a brothel owner and the boss of Little Lotus and Little Chrys, the reader does not understand what kind of relationship exists between these two. The reader will only hear about this in the following second-person narration, which starts at the time when A Qing and Little Jade come to Zhengzhou to attend beauty school. At that point, they have already worked several odd jobs, endured maltreatment and survived several attacks on their lives; they have seen how one of their friends (Little Wave) was beaten to death by a ruthless factory director[74] and they have themselves escaped his imprisonment. After they save Little Devil, they go back home, where they are about to be married. But they still have each other to discuss their relationship: '"Is that all we are, Little Jade – brothers? … I also know that you and I can't stay this way forever." "If two men could get married and have kids," Little Jade said, "I would definitely marry you!"'[75] This dialogue shows that they want to stay true to themselves, that they do not want to become 'passers' and live a lie. However, they still feel obligated to be filial towards their families by respecting their wishes and getting married to a woman.[76]

While most of A Qing's story is told by an anonymous heterodiegetic narrator, since his life is so intertwined with that of the others that this 'independent' voice is needed to tell all the details, the second-person narration in Chapter 13 is required in order to hear from him how he impregnated Sister Plum Blossom. A Qing started to work for her after Little Jade had left him following a fight. The work in the 'hair salon'/brothel reminds him of his adoptive mother and he starts to reflect on his life: His hate turns towards his birth parents.[77] In an attempt to satisfy her sexual desires and also to get rid of her, he has sex with Sister Plum Blossom, who pays him so that he continues to do so. Ironically, it is Dr Hua, A Qing's biological mother who had abandoned him, who helps her to get pregnant.

A Qing has never made a secret of his homosexuality, so he explains that he does not want to have this child, '"[b]ecause you're a prostitute and I'm a homosexual! We aren't qualified to have a child." … "I don't want this child," you repeated, and struck Sister Plum Blossom's stomach with a fist.'[78] He is afraid that he will disappoint his child as a father, that it will look on him with disdain. For very different reasons than his biological parents, then, A Qing does not want to keep his child even before it is born. His wish for it not to be born arises from fear and shame. Not fear and shame, indeed, vis-à-vis society – i.e. fear that they might not look 'normal' – but rather fear and shame vis-à-vis his own unborn child and how this child will see him. Unlike Xia Nanshan, A Qing is not concerned about 'losing face' in public, but about society not being able to value his flesh and blood: 'This society offered no sense of security; it wasn't worthy of receiving your child! You weren't a man, you were just human scum who had received more than your share of insults.'[79] Therefore, he feels that he must get rid of the child for its own protection and puts an abortion-inducing substance in Sister Plum Blossom's tea.

It is this story about A Qing becoming a father/parent that needs to be told from his own viewpoint – i.e. in the second-person. His being abandoned as a child and growing up in the countryside is what decided how his life would turn out. If Dr Hua and Xia Nanshan had not turned their backs on him, he would not have become a migrant worker, but would have lived a comfortable middle-class life. Although A Qing does not know who his parents are, he makes them responsible for his sufferings. In the end, it all comes down to money and fame. A Qing can only fulfil his dream and publish his novel once he has sold it to a famous author[80]; no publishing house wants to publish his poems and stories under his real name.[81] In an attempt to save Little Jade's life, he prostitutes himself and ends up stabbing his customer, who has insulted him. When Xia Nanshan hears from He Donghai that A Qing is his son and that he is in prison, he denies that A Qing can possibly be his and Dr Hua's son. He forbids his wife to visit A Qing in prison, saying:

> Are you out of your mind! … You're the director of Zhengzhou People's Hospital and I'm the principal of Zhengzhou No. 1 Middle School! To even think that we would let alone anyone know that we have a child who's in prison! Even if we had any face left, would we dare to show it in public? We already have a child, a child who's outstanding both in behaviour and in school! We have to be mindful of how we look in the eyes of others![82]

In particular his last sentence emphasizes his obsession with passing and living according to others' standards and values. Although Dr Hua shows signs of reluctance to adopt her husband's attitude, in the end she always follows his demands: She leaves her baby in the cold train station and later she does not visit him in prison. In the end, it is also she who sacrifices A Qing in an attempt to save her husband, by cutting out her son's heart after A Qing has been involved in an accident. While Dr Hua cannot know that it is indeed A Qing on her operating table, she nevertheless convinces him to sign all necessary documents and refuses him a phone call. When she cuts him open, his red heart comes out of his chest and screams 'Mama!'[83] This magical/fantastical element highlights her guilt and her failure

as a parent. In the end, both of them die on the operating table and Dr Hua is not able to save either her husband or her own child.

Ironically, A Qing's son, Future – who was born after all because Sister Plum Blossom noticed A Qing putting the abortion-inducing substance into her tea – remains alive. Although his mother died during his birth, he is given to Little Lotus – one of the prostitutes who worked for Sister Plum Blossom – who cannot have children of her own. Even after A Qing learns about his son and meets him for the first time, he still thinks that he cannot be a qualified father, because of his own childhood.[84] Even though Little Lotus wants to be a mother, in an act of spontaneity she leaves Future with two American clowns from a circus troupe after A Qing is already dead.[85] The fact that she did not sell Future to Dr Hua in the hospital as Dr Hua had suggested, but rather gives him to strangers from America for free, lends emphasis to A Qing's statement about Chinese society's not being worthy of having this child because it is a society that eats children.

This metaphor of 'eating people' certainly reminds one of Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' and also refers to society's need to reform and progress. In the novel this grotesque motif is not only used in the form of Sister Plum Blossom's old landlady, who cooks and eats dead babies,[86] but also in another passage of magic realism at the end of the novel. He Donghai has become the crematorium's director while at the same time he wants to sell human-meat dumplings in his dumpling shop with all his companions still alive and by his side.[87] Although he is already rich and famous, he still wants to make more money and acquire an even higher status in the village. This passage told in the first person by He Donghai can be seen as an externalization of his greatest fear: namely, of himself being part of this all-consuming society, in which human life becomes disposable.

Conclusion

From reading *Qi'er* we learn that queer Chinese-language literature can be brutal in its content, but we also realize that it is exactly this brutality which captivates and 'holds' us – the reader. What also 'holds' the reader here is that the narrative voice is not simply a disembodied voice telling them about the tragedies of A Qing, Little Jade, Little Tough, Little Thing, Little Devil and Little Fairy. It is rather these very characters' voices speaking through He Donghai, which also leads to the emphasis of the depicted ferociousness.

In *Qi'er* the queerness transcends the level of narrative content to the level of narrative discourse: Just as this narrative voice, or narrative voices, blurs the line between homo- and heterodiegetic, so too does the use of magic realism blur the barrier between reality and fantasy, thus enabling the reader to better understand reality. The truth becomes more palpable for the reader as this realistic yet fantastical narrative forces them to hear and see also the negative and horrible things from every possible angle, in particular from the angle of those who suffer from these things. By writing whereof one cannot, one must not (openly) speak, Mu Cao not only disrupts the readers but also the Chinese state, because rather than showing the 'trendy' side of being queer in China, *Qi'er* illustrates the conservatism of traditional Chinese society from the perspective of the underclass.

Notes

1 Mu Cao, *Qi'er* (Hong Kong: Xiandai wenhua chubanshe, 2011).

2 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

3 In my analysis, I am referring to the Chinese source text and I want to thank Mu Cao for providing me with a digital copy of his novel. However, since I overall agree with Myer's translation, if not indicated otherwise, I am citing from his English translation here.

4 Cf. Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 2–3.

5 Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

6 Ibid., 5–6.

7 Those cultural norms include for instance heterosexuality and having sex in private, not in public places such as parks.

8 Hongwei Bao, 'Queering the Global South: Mu Cao and his Poetry', in *The Global South and Literature*, ed. Russell West-Pavlov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 190.

9 Ibid., 189.

10 I am using Myer's translations for all the characters' names. However, he writes 'Ah' while I stick to the Pinyin transliteration 'A'.

11 There is usually no separation between major and main characters in narrative theory, which means that the major character or protagonist is also the main character. However, for a better understanding of the involvement of the characters, I will distinguish here between 'major' characters, i.e. characters that are important without the story being built exclusively around them, and 'main' characters, i.e. the characters that the story is really based on.

12 To the major characters in the novel a partnership is something more stable, and often means a romantic as well as a sexual relationship. The basis for their partnerships is a deep friendship, which all the major characters share with He Donghai and in most cases also with one another.

13 Mu Cao, *In the Face of Death We Are All Equal*, trans. Scott E. Myers (London: Seagull Books, 2019), 67.

14 Ibid., 75.

15 Ibid., 76–7.

16 Ibid., 77.

17 Ibid., 239.

18 Ibid., 161.

19 Ibid., 346.

20 Ibid., 344.

21 This is emphasized by Little Tough as well as A Qing. Ibid., 354 & 357.

22 Ibid., 332. Mu Cao uses the terms *tongzhi* 同志 and *tongxinglian* 同性恋 here for what Myer translated as 'gay people' and 'homosexuals' respectively. Bao explains that the term *tongzhi* was introduced in the PRC in the mid-1990s and was later used to refer to sexual or gender non-normativity, often meaning 'queer'. Before that, *tongxinglian* was used to refer to homosexual and queer people, albeit it often implied that homosexuality was a disease. Nowadays, the term *ku'er* is usually used when referring to 'queer'. See: Hongwei Bao, *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and* Tongzhi *Activism in Postsocialist China* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018), 76–7. For an in-depth discussion of the term *tongzhi* see also Elisabeth L. Engebretsen and William F. Schroeder, eds., *Queer/Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism and Media Culture* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015).

23 Mu Cao, *In the Face of Death We Are All Equal*, 203.

24 Ibid., 379–80.

25 Ibid., 355.

26 Ibid., 399.

27 As Petrus Liu states '"money boys" … are routinely abused from within gay community. Seeing money boys as a blight on the image of the homosexual community, Chinese

gay men are eager to dissociate themselves from money boys in their quest for respectability … ' Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.

28 Mu Cao, *In the Face of Death We Are All Equal*, 362–6.

29 Ibid., 257 (emphasis in the original).

30 Susan S. Lanser, 'Toward (a Queer and) More (Feminist) Narratology', in *Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2015), 24.

31 'Mu Cao', Words Without Borders, accessed 23 February 2023, https://wordswithoutborders.org/contributors/view/mu-cao/.

32 Bao, 'Queering the Global South'.

33 If the homodiegetic narrator is also the protagonist, Genette calls them autodiegetic narrator.

34 Mu Cao, *In the Face of Death We Are All Equal*, 7.

35 Cf. Monika Fludernik, 'Second-person narrative as a test case for narratology: The limits of realism', *Style* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1994). Fludernik makes a quite detailed differentiation between various *you*-narrations. Yet, since her categorization is irrelevant for this analysis, I will refrain from including it here.

36 Although the terms 'point-of-view' and 'perspective' are often used interchangeably, there is in fact a difference between them: Whereas the 'point-of-view' focuses on *who* is telling the story (who is speaking?), which is defined by the narrator, perspective refers to the characters'/narrator's view on what is happening in the story (how do they perceive what is happening?).

37 Mu Cao, *In the Face of Death We Are All Equal*, 5.

38 Ibid., 4–5.

39 Ibid., 5–6.

40 Ibid., 6–7. The novel is set in the early 1990s as indicated on page 26, when homosexuality was still a crime in the PRC.

41 Ibid., 7–8.

42 Ibid., 14.

43 Ibid., 15.

44 Ibid., 16.

45 Ibid., 135.

46 Ibid., 8.

47 Throughout the novel she is just called 'Dr Hua'. The reader does not get to know her first name, which makes her very impersonal.

48 Ibid., 9.

49 Ibid., 10.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 12.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 139.

56 Ibid., 223. In Chinese the sentence reads '小玉向我讲到这里,眼睛里涌出了泪水'. Mu Cao, 弃儿 *Qi'er* (2003), 83. The page numbers refer to the word-document Mu Cao has provided me with. They might not correspond to the printed version. I fully agree with Scott

Myers's translation, I have simply added the part in brackets to highlight the shift from second- to first-person narration.

57 For a clearer understanding of 'memory monologue' see: Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds*: *Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

58 This is based on the differentiation between 'narrating *I*' and 'experiencing *I*': the narrating *I* is telling what the experiencing *I* has experienced in retrospect. It is also possible that narrating *I* and experiencing *I* are one and the same, if the *I*-narrator is telling a story that is happening at present.

59 Mu Cao, *In the Face of Death We Are All Equal*, 46.

60 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 133–4.

61 Douglas Robinson suggests the term 'transdiegetic' narrator (a magnificent example of how to amplify Genette's binaries) for what seems to be a similar narrative situation, in which a hetero- turns into a homodiegetic narrator and the other way round, except that the narrator in this instance is not one and the same person, who tells the story of their coming out, but indeed two different narrators: He Donghai and one of the major characters. Therefore, in my opinion, the term 'transdiegetic' narrator does not quite fit this situation, since the switch from one to the other also means a switch of the point of view. See Douglas Robinson, *Transgender, Translation, Translingual Address* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 57–9.

62 Mu Cao, *In The Face of Death We Are All Equal*, 183.

63 Ibid., 180.

64 Ibid., 182.

65 Ibid., 194.

66 Ibid., 49.

67 Ibid., 52.

68 Ibid., 56.

69 Ibid., 61.

70 See Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China, Article 2 A on the English website of The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, accessed 20 April 2023: http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content_1384064.htm

71 Ibid., 61.

72 When he first meets him, he describes him as 'looking very much like my first love, Xia Nanshan' (Ibid., 18). Later he also wonders: 'I loved silently watching Ah Qing – was it traces of Xia Nanshan that I saw?' (Ibid., 264), only to realize that A Qing is indeed Xia Nanshan's son, which they had 'lost' many years ago in Chapter 19 (Ibid., 386).

73 Ibid., 266.

74 Ibid., 207.

75 Ibid., 259.

76 Ibid., 108.

77 Ibid., 272.

78 Ibid., 278.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 385–6.

81 Ibid., 361.

82 Ibid., 389.

83 Ibid., 399.

84 Ibid., 334.

85 Ibid., 402–3.

86 Throughout the novel it remains unclear from where the old landlady gets miscarried or aborted babies, but it is indicated that it is indeed Dr Hua who gives them to her. (Ibid., 288)

87 Ibid., 400–1.

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Chapter 9

Chen Xue's Rags-to-Riches Subversion: An Underside Story of Taiwan's Economic Miracle Told from a Working-Class Perspective

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Born in 1970, Chen Xue 陳雪 is a veteran writer from Taiwan, known for her fanciful and avant-garde treatment of lesbianism. Since the much-sensationalized publication of her first volume of fiction, *The Evil Women* 惡女書 in 1995, Chen Xue has been steadily contributing to Taiwan's queer literature. Up to date (2024), she has produced three short-story collections, twelve novels and ten collections of prose essays, making her one of the most prolific writers in Taiwan's literary landscape. In this chapter, I analyse her fifth novel *A Child on the Bridge* 橋上的孩子 (2004),[1] a turning point in her literary theme, as she began to explore her working-class background. Furthermore, as *A Child* is narrated by a queer daughter, whose sexuality remains conspicuously unmarked, the novel then represents a rare intersection of working-class literature and queer literature in Chinse-language literature. Critics, such as Liou Laing-Ya and Noriko Shirouze, have regarded *A Child* as a watershed in terms of the author's theme. While Liou regards the novel as departing from 'the topics of *tongzhi* and eroticism as portrayed by *The Evil Women* (1995) and *Nightwalking 1994* (1996)', Shirouze affirms the author's turn to her working-class experience in the night markets 'a locale rarely charted by Taiwanese authors'.[2] As ideal locales for native-soil imaginary,[3] night markets and wet markets function as the setting for the working-class world in the novel. Chen Xue traces the first-person narrator's trajectory from a teenaged daughter of a working-class, money-strapped nuclear family to an established literary author residing in the upscale apartment in the metropolis of Taipei. I argue that Chen Xue casts her story in the familiar pattern of a rags-to-riches[4] parable of success, only to break that paradigm by insisting on a close look at what the public media narrative ordinarily fails to scrutinize: the sense of incongruity in the middle-class world, as an individual from the working-class background moves socially upward. Moreover, set in Taiwan's alleged economic miracle period, namely, the 1980s, *A Child*'s subversion of rags-to-riches paradigm simultaneously questions the discourse of economic miracle. Furthermore, with Chen Xue's own account of *A Child* in her advocacy for the indigenous rights, the text shows an alliance between sexual/gender minority and the socio-culturally underprivileged. This alliance, I argue, qualifies Chen Xue to be a 'queer Marxist' author, as proposed by Petrus Liu in *Queer Marxism of Two Chinas.*

Synopsis

A Child consists of five semi-independent sections, each of which addresses the topic of class mobility. It is motivated by the first-person narrator's compulsive repetition of telling her family trauma, which had remained opaque and unspeakable until the age of twenty-five. The transition occurs when she begins to recount her family trauma to her intimate lovers, whose genders are consistently omitted throughout. The narrator's trauma originates from a series of enormous debts her family owed to unspecified parties since she was eight years old. The debt is never paid off even when she becomes an established

fiction writer, known for her bold treatment of lesbian eroticism, at the age of twenty-five. In her recount of the family trauma, she addresses herself as 'the girl (女孩)', who appears to be someone else than her. Adopting the third-person perspective, the narrator then seemingly gains a distance from her trauma. Such splitting of the perspective, evoking a sense of mental split, reflects the psychological scar incurred by the narrator's upward class mobility, symptomatic of her struggle of integrating the memory of her working-class experience into her middle-class life.

The enormous debts involve each of the narrator's family members, including her two younger siblings, into intensive labouring in traditional markets. As a child labourer, the narrator recalls, through the perspective of 'the girl', that she has been compelled to be a peddler at the night market and the wet market as young as eight. When she is between eight and twelve, due to the intensive labouring nature of traditional markets, her parents are constantly absent, leaving the narrator the surrogate caretaker of her younger brother and sister.

The time appears to be 1980s when the narrator reaches the age of twelve. Her family finally 'unites' as they reside together within Fengyuan wet market in the suburbs of Taichung. Taking up less than ten square metres and consisting of only one plank bed and two chairs, their family home is squalid and deprived. At the age of fifteen, the family has a temporary respite from the debt as they manage to rent a fixed shop at a night market in Fengyuan. The family continues to sell clothes, their stock in trade since their peddler times. Eventually, the narrator moves out as she starts her undergraduate degree, indicating her transition into a middle-class world. At the end of the story, she lives in a skyscraper overlooking the illegal rooftop additions congregating around the nearby skyline in the metropolis of Taipei. She earns her living by writing fiction, a profession that she determines to become when she was younger. Agitated and nervous, the narrator in her clean and quiet apartment awaits the visit of her newest lover, who similarly grew up in a peddler family and toiled hard when the lover should have enjoyed the childhood. To the narrator, her lover is another 'child on the bridge' whom she believes to have been waiting for her, on the other side of the bridge, since she was little.

In the novel, the lovers' genders remain unmarked throughout. The unmarked genders of these lovers raise questions about the narrator's sexuality. While the narrator's gender is marked as female, her lovers are elided from any markers of gender and sex. Readers never learn her lovers' names or physical details about how she makes love to them. Such information omission, I suggest, constitutes what Genette has called 'paralepsis', that is, the deliberate underreporting of information that *should* be conventionally provided by a narrator.[5] Given that Chen has been known as a queer writer, this omission of the lovers' genders is not insignificant. It should be read, at least, as the author's technique to disorient readers' assumption of heterosexuality. Even for readers who are unfamiliar with Chen Xue's works and are conventional, such gender omission might still raise suspicion, as the omission is so consistent throughout that questions about the narrator's sexuality are very hard not to arise. At any rate, Chen's paralepsis has a queer function, which upsets the convention of fiction writings by stripping its protagonist/narrator of a specific sexuality.

The rags-to-riches subverted

The period between 1970 and 1990 in Taiwan is considered as a period of economic miracle. In an article of *The Wall Street Journal,* this period of Taiwan is called to the mind for its 'success story' and is studied as one of the three models for the 'Asian miracles'.[6] The article palpably reads Taiwan as exemplifying a rags-to-riches case, as it asserts that 'rags-to-riches stories of poor societies [Taiwan being one of them] suddenly leapfrogging others typically provoke admiration, envy and intense discussion'.[7] Taiwan is then intensely discussed by the article. In another economic study, this period of Taiwan similarly

embodies a rags-to-riches case. The study forcefully asserts that 'Taiwan tells a story of "rags to riches"' at its very opening,[8] narrating how the society leapfrogs from an economic basket case, resurrecting from the ashes of Second World War. In the local media discourse of the 1980s, representations of individuals who strike it rich by running a small shop or selling as a peddler were a staple. As Yu Shuenn-Der observes, public sentiments from the period of 1970 to 1990 firmly believe in the start-from-scratch spirit, or as the popular Taiwanese-Hokkien song title indicates 'You must strive to win' (愛拚才會贏).[9] However, as Yu observes, the rags-to-riches success of small-vendor business occurs 'very rarely'.[10] The rate of class mobility is in fact low.

Corresponding to Yu's observation, this chapter argues that *A Child* disputes the grand narrative of Taiwan's alleged economic miracle as described above. Narrated from a working-class perspective, the story presents a critique of economism-oriented policies endorsed by the state ideology of Taiwanese government as it transited into NIC in the 1980s and ranked as the Four Asian Tigers. One of the story's critiques of economism is framed within the narrator's recount of her father, whose biography is best described as a *failed* rags-to-riches story. By caricaturing the narrator's father as an anti-hero duped by the rags-to-riches paradigm, *A Child* contests the veracity of Taiwan's economic miracle discourse, characterizing it as a sham. In the voice of the grown-up narrator, she describes her father as someone who

> 是那麼勤奮近乎拼命以致於身邊的人都感受到一股莫大的壓力,一種窮人才能體會到的方式,企圖用自己的雙手翻轉自己階級的強大意志力,用一些不夠精明不夠世故的方式,近乎天真可笑地努力著。
>
> works so earnestly to the extent of exhausting his life that people around him sense an insurmountable stress. He strives in a way only the poor could and intends to subvert his class by his own hands, such a strong willpower, only to come up with some quite not sophisticated, practiced ways that appear ludicrous.[11]

Far from being inspirational to readers, as rags-to-riches paradigm typically renders, the father's ill-considered attempt for upward class mobility becomes a cautionary tale. It cautions readers to not believe in this paradigm. His attempt is 'ludicrous' at best, the narrative poignantly warns us and foreshadows the father's doomed failure.

Furthermore, the narrator characterizes his father's motivation for class mobility as blind by comparing his belief in economic miracle discourse to his blind eyes. Wounded by an undetected missile explosion, his eyes 'are marked by white scars and always murky' (殘留著白色的傷痕,眼球總是濁濁的).[12] Running out of the money to treat his eye injury, the father leaves school after the third grade. The lack of education and illiteracy, symbolized by his blind eyes, traps him into the working class permanently. Her father is blinded at a symbolic level as well. He is clouded by the rags-to-riches stories widely circulated in the news media of 1980s. The father, 'with his single-minded desire for entrepreneurship, has plied so many trades' (一心想要開創事業的他做過好多行業), which include recycling and reselling batteries on the black market, carpentry and eventually investing in an unspecified business that 'leads to a series of tragedies' (自此發生了一連串的悲劇).[13] His belief in the class mobility, anticlimactically, only leads to disasters. The father's attempt for small business is not untypical during the 1980s. As Taiwan transited into NIC, many households began to run small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The government of the 1980s encouraged SMEs and believed it to be the backbone of Taiwan's economic miracle. Consequently, the popular sentiment of that time promoted individual entrepreneurship and even marked it as a quintessentially Taiwanese value. SMEs were considered by the public as a plausible way for climbing up the social ladder. Ironically, the father's drive for individual entrepreneurship is a terrible mistake. As the narrative traces the origin of the family's financial disasters to his father's eye disease, which prevents his father (the assumed breadwinner) from acquiring better economic means, the father's wounded eyes

take on a symbolic significance. It is the father's eyes that should be blamed, if only at a symbolic level:

> 女孩想要逃開那雙淒濛眼睛的注視,或者乾脆能夠進入他的視線裡看清楚他所企圖構築的世界,到底是什麼,那兒有個什麼凝望著她,彷彿時間剎那凍結在他眼中,灰濛濛的,有個白色的圓點,不斷旋轉著,女孩也跟著轉,一整個家庭五口人都被捲入那逐漸縮小的漩渦裡,逐漸下沉,終致消失不見。
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> The girl wants to escape from the gaze of those clouded eyes, or, if she cannot, just enter into his vision and see clearly the world her father is attempting to build, what is it after all? Something there is staring at her, as though time had frozen in his eyes, something murky, a tiny white spot, spinning incessantly, the girl spinning with it, the whole family, all five of them, all swirling into that ever-shrinking maelstrom, gradually sinking and eventually vanishing into it.[14]

Whereas the economic miracle discourse typically characterizes the spirit for individual entrepreneurship as an approving ethics, evoking a hard-working, can-do image, in this passage this spirit, by contrast, is characterized as a 'maelstrom', which drags down the whole family members into poverty. By casting the father into an anti-hero whose ending is not economic success but indebtedness, *A Child* refuses the self-made man myth endorsed by the economic miracle discourse during Taiwan's rapid transitioning into an industrialized state. It casts serious doubt on the prosperous economic outlook painted by the government of that time, demanding one to examine cases (such as her father's) where economism does not work.

In fact, the narrative throughout questions the drive for upward class mobility. The narrator traces her trajectory of climbing the social ladder in terms of neurosis. She characterizes the maladaptation of her newly required middle-class status in terms of a series of ailment which cause elude her:

> 各種疼痛提醒我生命的存在,經常地,我處在各種莫名的病痛之中,頭痛腳痛背痛腰痛眼睛痛喉嚨痛胸痛月經痛,上醫院像在逛百貨公司[…]醫生看著我,「沒什麼問題啊!」我知道他想打發我走,好像我就是那種最會浪費醫療資源的人,此時我正在無病呻吟,稍微有頭腦的人都知道我該看的是精神科[…]什麼毛病發作了?症狀清晰,病名不詳。
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> Every sort of pain reminds me of my existence; I am constantly beset by all kinds of ailments, headache foot pain backpain wrist pain eyes pain throat pain chest pain period pain. I visit the departments of hospital like I am shopping at a department store […] The doctor looks at me, 'nothing wrong with you!' I know he wants to dismiss me, like someone who wastes medical resources. And I know I am whining for no ailments, anyone with any intelligence knows I should turn to mental department. […] What ailment is it? The syndrome is specific, but undiagnosed.[15]

Now as a middle-class famed writer, she could afford medical resources. However, her account of doctor seeing suggests that middle-class-ness to be a neurosis, at least for someone who has climbed from the working class. The narrator likens her middle-class self to a lunatic and caricatures herself as a welfare queen, who is now overly entitled to the welfare system, as if her relationship with the social welfare would never be adequate – either underprivileged or being abusive. The whole passage is marked by a self-mocking tone, especially evident in the narrator's simile of department store. As a poor child in the vendor's family, she used to find department store shopping beyond her means. The simile indicates a discomfortable aspect of upward class mobility: though the narrator could now afford medical treatment, a middle-class experience luxurious to her past working-class self, it could only make her hypochondriac and bring self-mockery. The simile of department store at the same time presents a critique of middle-class world. Shopping at department

stores, a bourgeois entertainment that equates consumption to pleasure, to a lifestyle, and in the case of then newly industrializing Taiwan to a chic urban activity, is comparable to seeing a doctor. Through this comparison, the narrative suggests that department store shopping is symptomatic, neurotic even, as newly middle-classed customers wonder through piles of items seeking cures for their ineffable symptoms.

These symptoms are ineffable in medical discourse because it belongs to another sphere, that of a class problem. To the narrator, her trajectory of upward social mobility is the root cause for her malaise. Her hypochondriasis exhibits, rather, the unfitting-ness, conflict, loss and guilt for moving into the middle-class world, which surely cannot be captured by the doctors. Only a few lines after the passage quoted above, the narrator admits to readers the cause of her ailment: 'I know, it is because it's raining now' (我知道,是下雨的緣故).[16] The parents' vendor loses customers if it rains. The intergeneration mobility achieved by the narrator produces guilt in her, as she is incapable of alleviating the whole family's financial burden. This guilt transforms into ailments that terrorizes her because she has left her working-class parents behind, and she alone is sheltered from the rain.

Her class mobility guilt is also marked by a sense of 'mental split', a sense of attempting to split her mental state into two parts – her working-class past and her newly minted middle-class self. This sense of 'mental split' is reflected by the narrator's constant shift between the third-person voice (the girl) and the first-person voice (I), as if by addressing her working-class childhood and adolescence in a third-person voice, she could disown that working-class past. However, that attempt is ultimately futile, as what remains continuous and unbroken is precisely her class mobility guilt that transforms into ineffable ailment now that she becomes middle-class. The narrator's sense of class mobility guilt, again, casts doubt on the economic miracle discourse, as this discourse rarely comments on the social climber's inner world, nor does it treat intergenerational mobility as a source of trauma and guilt.

Working-class life in the traditional market

In *A Child,* the traditional market represents the working-class collectivity, which contrasts with the narrator's individualist life in her apartment, symbolic of the alienation of middle-class world. The night market is described as a vibrant, labour-intensive, and lively place with sensory experiences, spontaneity and theatricality. The market vendor's make-do thriftiness and charisma captivate the narrator and inspire her to be a writer. The narrative, then, does not treat the working-class life as hardships, at least not entirely. Furthermore, by presenting the working-class collectivity as a source of inspiration, *A Child* establishes the night market as a bridge (in a metaphorical sense) that mediates the working-class world and the middle class. Such mediation then refuses the rags-to-riches paradigm of class mobility, that moving socially upward should imply a clean cut from the working-class world.

The narrative's treatment of the working-class life in traditional markets is best captured by its evocation of traditional theatre's spatial structure: the front stage and backstage. Modelling on the front stage, the narrative captures working-class life by its vibrancy and spontaneity – the vendor parents, resembling actors on stage, hollering, improvising, gathering a huge crowd of audience (the patrons in potential). Conversely, during the parents' off-duty time akin to the backstage where audience cannot perceive, the vendor parents, being 'off-stage', tired out after sequences of hollering, are cast into different light – drained and weary, dogged by the nightmare of indebtedness. By evoking such structure, the narrative is capable of presenting two modes of working-class collectivity. Seen from the front stage, working-class collectivity is presented with mesmerizing charm, vigorous and brisk. From the backstage, it is captured by its gruelling conditions. *A Child* in turn contests a romanticism of working-class collectivity by showing its two contrasting modes,

as it presents working-class life in an ambivalent mood. The following passage narrates the transitioning moment in which the narrator's mother is pushed onto the stage and the moment when, crowds dissipating, her family are off stage:

> 媽媽平時也不多話,但只要站上板凳扯開嗓子就[…]充滿無比的群眾魅力,彷彿催眠著那些先生小姐叔叔阿姨,大家都陷入一種迷幻的氛圍不知不覺掏出了口袋裡的鈔票。[…] 前一分鐘還是病懨懨的,不是在一旁打瞌睡,就是在角落裡抽煙,轉眼間好像成了舞台上的大明星,說學逗唱,丰姿萬千[…]他們彷彿都在一種幸福的氛圍裡,情緒不斷升高 […] 等到人潮散盡 […]他們只是五個精疲力竭、蓬頭垢面的男女老小,肚子餓得咕咕直叫[…]原來這不過是一場跟昨天一樣的買賣,債務還是在那兒等著,賺不了大錢,明天依然要繼續這樣辛苦地營生。
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> Mother in her usual time is not talkative, but as soon as she stands up at a stool, throat opening up, she is […] full of charisma, hypnotizing those misters, misses, uncles and aunties, into a trance where they all take out banknotes from their pockets. […] One minute ago Mother might be languid, either dozing off or smoking at the corner, now she becomes a superstar on a stage, speaking, imitating, teasing and singing, splendidly […] It's like they are all in a blissful ambience, feeling elevated […] When the crowds tails off […] They become nothing but five burnt-out, unkempt, young and old males and females, stomachs hungrily rumbling. As it were, today's selling is nothing unlike yesterday's; debts await them, never making huge money, and tomorrow is for another toilful living.[17]

The narrative registers the mother's portrayal in theatrical terms, characterizing it as 'a superstar on a stage.'[18] Like an actress entering the stage, the mother is energized by the gathering crowds, who are enjoying her performance. The crosstalk 相聲 phrase (speaking, imitating, teasing and singing 說學逗唱) especially characterizes the mother's labouring as a versatile, impromptu proto-theatre performance. And as her mother transforms herself into a stand-up performer, so are the crowds transformed into the audience. They are mesmerized by the mother's stage charm, paying the bills under a spell. However, the show cannot last forever. As the crowds disappear, the curtains are dropped. The narrative shifts into a naturalist style and the tone appears unforgiving.

In contrast to the glamourizing tone used in describing the mother on stage, the passage at the end shifts to reduce the characters. The end captures them by their base bodily features, 'unkempt, burnt-out and hungrily', as they are exhausted by the performance of working-class vivacity. The passage finally ends with a harsh conclusion and unforgiving prediction, portending that the whole scene shall be repeated tomorrow. The theatre of working-class vivacity turns out to be nothing but a humdrum. *A Child* thus presents a nuanced portrayal of working-class life, capturing its complexity through its contradiction.

However, it should be noted that it is only when the narrator enters the middle-class life can she grasp this contradiction: 'Isn't the selling life filled with fun that only those who have experienced it can taste?' (那些買賣的生活不也充滿許多不身在其中無法體會的樂趣?).[19] The 'fun' of traditional markets only begins to emerge when the narrator, alone, enters the middle-class world. Now renting an apartment in Taipei all by herself, the narrator finds herself irresistibly drawn to the vitality of traditional markets. Visiting the market, she engages us with a realistic social profiling of the two young working-class males in an appreciative tone, suggesting a positive endorsement of the working-class life:

> 兩個二十歲左右的年輕男孩,像是兄弟模樣,手上總是沾滿麵粉,會細心地跟客人講解各種麵條的不同 […] 有時我會在那兒看他們忙,生意挺好,來的都是老客人[…] 勤奮安靜的男孩子,自力更生[…] 臉上常常沾了麵粉有些白白的,看起來面容白淨斯文,常常很親切地跟我談天。

> Two young boys at their early twenties, seeming brothers, hands always dusted with flour, would carefully explain the types of noddles to customers […] Sometimes I like to be there watching them busying, they have a pretty good business, those who visit are old patrons […] Diligent, quiet boys, standing on their own feet […] their faces regularly tinted by flour, whitish, appear fair-skinned and well-mannered. They often engage me with friendly chats.[20]

While the previous passage employs the front stage/backstage to represent working-class life, this passage does not. It is narrated entirely from a middle-class customer, who is the narrator. The passage characterizes the brothers as content and competent, as they 'quietly and diligently' display a wide variety of their items to patrons. Rather than holler and shout and compelled into performance, as the narrator's mother does, the brothers appear to remain to be themselves. By contrast, the passage dignifies the characters by describing them as 'fair-skinned' and 'well-mannered', using language associated with civility that elevates them above their supposed working class. The proverbial 'standing on their own feet', likewise, casts the characters in a positive light, valuing their self-sufficiency. Furthermore, the passage does not portray labouring as exhausting, as it turns out, the characters can afford themselves for lovely conversations with the customers.

Shifting from the structure of front stage/backstage to a distanced reading from the middle-class customer, the narrative, towards the end, develops into a reconciliation with and then appreciation for the working-class life. At its most, the working-class collectivity is presented in terms of its contradiction, expressed equally by the motif of trauma and of wonder. *A Child* does not treat working-class life as entire hardship, something that should be overcome. Presenting it in its contradiction, the narrative demands readers to reflect upon working-class life in terms of its complexity, which denies a streamlined, rags-turning-into-riches reading of the narrator's upward class mobility. It is in this way that *A Child* offers an alternative model than SMEs, suggesting jobs in traditional market sector to be equally valid. Furthermore, the narrative treats the working-class life as indispensable to the narrator, even after she becomes a middle class. Working-class life, as it turns out, becomes the source of her literary inspiration, further provoking her writing to reflect a working-class consciousness. The lesson for the narrator's class mobility, *A Child* argues for its readers, is not that hard work shall overcome poverty, but that economic miracle discourse has in fact overlooked class problems. It is through the narator's satire of her own class mobility, as the next sextion shows, that readers notice the class tension obscured by economic miracle discourse.

A satire of middle-class values

Over the course of the story, the narrator, as she, again and again, recounts her traumatic childhood to her many lovers, develops a more logical (in terms of chronology and reason) and more realistic account of her working-class background. The penultimate semi-independent section, 'Take me somewhere far' 帶我去遠方, shows that the narrator has reconciled with the trauma from her working-class background. In contrast to the rest, 'Take me somewhere far' is told in an expository mood and parodies a reportage style. The narrator, in a sardonic manner, reports and reflects on the ways in which her story of class mobility has provoked responses laden with classism. As observed by the narrator, it appears to strike many readers odd that an avant-garde and queer-identified author like her should come from a vendor's family. 'Take me somewhere far' seizes such reader responses and turns them into its object of satire. This section then should be read as *A Child*'s project of subverting a desirable middle-class life, part of its critique of the rags-to-riches narrative.

'Take me somewhere far' subverts a desirable middle-class life, typically celebrated by the ending of rags-to-riches stories, by casting the narrator's middle-class life into a life of outsider. This casting dramatizes the dividing line between the working-class world and the

middle class. Newly entering into the middle-class world, the narrator is characterized by a strong sense of maladaptation. She finds out her working-class background does not align with the middle-class ideal of professions: 'That a fiction writer who was not a teacher, editor or journalist, but used to be a waitress, worker, vendor, delivery person seems enough to invite endless discussion' (一個小說家既不當老師也不是編輯記者,而是個服務生、女工、擺地攤的小販、外務送貨員,好像也夠讓人討論不休的了。).[21] Narrating in a bewildered tone, she is smartingly aware of the classism behind readers' judgement of her class mobility. Trying to match up with the middle-class expectation, the narrator confesses that she has indeed tried to cast her experience of class mobility into a rags-to-riches story:

> 剛出書的時候常常被問到職業,我那時正跟第一個女朋友一起在夜市擺攤賣衣服,被媒體刊載出來之後被許多人不斷地轉述,變成什麼傳奇人物,我自己那時候也很俗氣,以為是在顛覆什麼大眾對作家的刻板印象,故意在那兒說些什麼好像自己很特別似的,其實只是在賺錢謀生[…]真可笑,企圖塑造一個全新的自己,一種新的身分[…] 只可惜那些手段都是失敗的。
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> When I published my first book, frequently I got asked what I did for living; I was selling clothes at a vendor at a night market with my first girlfriend. The media found out and broadcast it and it was recounted by so many people; I became some sort of legend. I was rather tacky at that time, considering myself as subverting stereotype about writers, saying things purposefully as if I am special. Truth is I was just making a living. […] Laughable, trying to cast a brand-new self, a new identity […] alas those means failed completely.[22]

In the passage, the media, representing the middle-class world, relentlessly seeks to convert the narrator into a rags-to-riches heroine, which she finds hard to resist. In a retrospective mood, the narrator sees her younger self as 'tacky' and 'laughable', a sycophantic figure, in her past succumbing to rags-to-riches narrative. Caricaturing her younger self as being clowned by the rags-to-riches narrative, the narrator, in turn, rejects to be read as such. Ultimately, the narrator finds the mould of rags-to-riches story inadequate to her experience of class mobility, as she plainly maintains that she is 'just making a living', a mundane working-class lifestyle. Admittedly, she has indeed tried to cast her class mobility experience into a narrative of rags turning into riches, but that proves to be unsuccessful. Referring to her working-class experiences, she further reveals that 'events refreshing and interesting to others are painfully unbearable past to me' (對別人來說新奇有趣的經歷對我而言是痛苦不堪的往事).[23] By expressing class mobility in terms of unbearable trauma, the narrative demands class mobility to be read as rife with psychological scars.

If *A Child* demands class mobility to be read as a trauma, then its satire of middle-class values appears to suggest a working-class consciousness. It is in the narrator's satirical rebuttal of the middle-class temperament that we find an emerging sense of working-class consciousness:

> 情人朋友都對我選的工作有很多意見,那時情人是人家說的什麼藝術家,常常說:「你去上班之後變了很多。」[…] 還說我氣質變差了,神經!我本來就沒什麼氣質跟KTV有什麼關係?[…] 靠自己的能力掙錢有什麼不對?我這人對於什麼藝術氣質文化修養的都沒興趣,也不在乎別人對我有什麼看法,我只是臉色看起來比較蒼白而已。
>
> Lovers and friends have lots to say about my jobs. My lover back then was the so-called artist, who often says to me "you change so much after you work there." […] even claiming that I was less refined. Psycho! I am not refined anyway; how does that get to do with my work in karaoke? […] Nothing wrong about earning on my own, no? I am not interested at all in refinement or civility, and I don't care about others' opinion of me. I happen to look rather pale and that is all.[24]

In a scornful and comic manner, the passage satires the middle-class ideal of temperament. Addressing it as 'psycho', the passage characterizes such ideal as neurotic. Prior to 'Take me somewhere far', what has been pathologized is the working-class conditions. In 'Take me somewhere far', the narrator pathologizes, instead, the middle-class ideal. Furthermore, in an ostensibly self-humbling tone, the narrator promotes the self-striving ethic of the working-class. The rhetorical question – 'Nothing wrong about earning on my own, no?' – reveals her endorsement of the working-class lifestyle, rejecting to align with what the middle class considers as refined or civilized. In the last sentence, the narrator shifts into an unreliable narrator, which ostensibly turns a blind eye to her lovers' class reading of her. She sardonically displaces their class reading into a reading of her complexion. Ironically, when the middle class demands 'refinement' and 'civility', the narrative only presents to it a 'rather pale' figure. In this way, the passage mocks the middle-class craze for 'civility' and 'refinement', implying it to be nothing but tedious white.

If the narrative's satire of middle-class values already subverts a desirable middle-class life, its ending further suggests an affirmation of working-class lifestyle. Its last semi-independent section, 'Unicorn of Clouds' 雲的獨角獸, celebrates the union of the narrator and her lover who is, likewise, born into a working-class family. The section follows the lover, holding hands with the narrator, and introduces her to the lover's mother at their family home, a custom suggesting the formal acceptance into family. By concluding the story with a symbolic return to the working-class world, the ending rejects a stable arrival into the middle-class world. It subverts what the narrative previously treats as a source of trauma and embarrassment; namely, the working-class background. The narrative at its ending treats the working-class background of the narrator's latest lover with a commendation:

> 穿過小街上賣著各種吃食店舖的夜市來到你們家 [...] 遠遠就看見你那美麗年輕得不可思議的媽媽在店裡招呼 [...] 安靜靦腆地切著高麗菜 [...] 我好喜歡聽你說起爸爸的各種事情,手藝很好的他,會做各種好吃的料理 [...] 客人是怎樣地大排長龍綿延到隔壁的騎樓[...]你說他每隔一段時間就會迷上收集某種東西,比如我眼前的這些茶壺,他離開幾年來依然在牆上的櫃子裡散發著淡淡的茶香。
>
> Through the night market alley populated by all kinds of eatery, we come to your home. [...] from afar I see your incredibly young and beautiful mother attends business [...] quietly, modestly slicing the cabbages [...] I love to hear every kind of things you tell about your father, who are very skilled, used to cook all the delicious dishes [...] the way that customers are in a long winding queue that takes up even the neighbouring shop's veranda [...] You say once in a while he would be obsessed with collecting certain things; for instance, these teapots in front of me still effuses their tea scent mildly in the cabinet of a wall years after he had gone.[25]

The tone of this passage is tender. The narrative captures a scene of successful family business and the benevolence of both parents. While the narrator's father is to be blamed for dragging down the whole family with his belief in individual entrepreneurship, the lover's father is, on the contrary, cast in an admirable light. He is described as an able man, capable of versatile dishes that attract huge crowds to queue for him. If the narrative previously condemns the narrator's father because he bears the original sin of working-class struggle, then the narrative in the last section praises the lover's father for his working-class ethics and his embodiment of a successful working-class figure. The lover's mother, too, is cast into a benevolent figure, working 'quietly and modestly'. The narrative presents her as a modest widowed housewife. If night market is perceived to be rowdy, evoking the quality of working class, then the mother's modesty appears to contest this perception. In this way, *A Child* suggests the narrator's reconciliation with her working-class past by showing her admiring a working-class family. Strikingly, as the narrator claims

to ‘love to hear every kind of things’ about the lover’s family anecdotes, the narrative presents her as someone who is irresistibly drawn to the working-class world. It is no longer ‘a painfully unbearable past’ to her. The passage eventually ends in an elegiac tone, memorizing the working-class father. The father is symbolically elevated above his working class by his habit of collecting teapots, a predilection associated with literati in premodern time. Told in an admirable and affectionate tone, *A Child* ultimately presents a satisfactory, humble and hard-working image of a working-class family.

However, the ending should not be read conservatively as a nostalgia for the working-class world, or as a eulogy of romantic love that mitigates class struggle, since the narrative does not shy away from asserting the pain of working-class struggle. As *A Child* throughout recognizes trauma and loss within the *success* of upward class mobility, *A Child* should be treated as a protest to the economic miracle myth of happy upward mobility. Furthermore, in an interview of 2009, Chen Xue relates how the negativities incurred by class mobility evoke what she considers as a sense of ‘same community of common destiny’ 命運共同體 for people who also suffer from Taiwan’s economic miracle. Comparing the class mobility experience to that of the indigenous, Chen Xue perceives the residence rights of Sanying Tribe 三鶯部落, a group of indigenous people facing forced dislocation due to their alleged squatting at the riverbed of Dahan in Taipei, in the following terms:

> I feel myself and the Sanying tribe at a certain level belong to the same community of common destiny. Because I had grown out of a life experience of an itinerant peddler, unlawful, against the rules and should not exist: the tribe and I were both illegal, subjected to be fined; our vendors thrown, people apprehended, and items confiscated. […] I don’t comprehend Sanying tribe merely in terms of indigenous rights, but rather comprehend it as embodying manifold marginality, such as incapable of earning a living in urban area, squatting and more. The tribe’s manifold marginality is akin to my identities: I am a *tongzhi;* my sexuality obscure to the public […] People are made up of many parts [of identities], meaning that we won’t always belong to the mainstream, and some people happen to have more parts of their identities that are marginal. […] I want to comprehend the tribe in the totality of its manifold marginality, rather than out of humanitarian concerns.[26]

The Sanying tribe faced the order of evacuation in 1994, as the government identified the Dahan riverbed to be a potential flooding area. Consequently, the tribe, which had lived there since the early 1980s, should be dispersed. The tribe was eventually demolished in 2018 after two decades of protests. While the government narrowly regards the issue as squatting, the Sangying tribe, in reality, suggests the underside of Taiwan’s economic miracle. The tribe came to the metropolis of Taipei in the early 1980s when the economic miracle of Taiwan demanded huge number of labourers. Most of them migrated from the mountainous regions of east Taiwan seeking factory jobs in the city of Taipei. As the economic miracle of Taiwan began to tail off from the mid-1980s, many indigenous labourers were laid off. Unemployed and diasporic, the indigenous labourers resettle themselves at the outskirt of Taipei, forming the Sanying tribe. The establishment of the tribe, in turn, suggests a less glorious side of economic miracle, a labour force exploited and then discarded. From 2008 to 2009, Chen Xue, among other cultural figures including Zhu Tianxin 朱天心 and Hou Xiaoxian 侯孝賢, protested with the Sanying tribe. In the statement above, the writer explains clearly how her class mobility experience expands her comprehension of the Sanying tribe, a comprehension that grasps the issue by its many layers of disadvantages. What she considers to be the core of a sense of ‘same community of common destiny’ are the disadvantaging experiences that underlie the identities of her and the people of Sanying tribe. In this way, Chen Xue’s statement resists a conservative reading of her text, especially for its ending. Read jointly with the statement above, the narrator’s union with a working-class lover, then, is more about an insistence on uniting

together through common causes of disadvantages than a cancellation, or letting go, of those past experiences because the character has found love.

Chen's advocacy for alliance of the socially culturally underprivileged makes *A Child* readable as an example of what Petrus Liu proposes to be 'queer Marxism'. In *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (2015), Liu relentlessly argues that the literary authors and theoreticians that he refers as 'queer Marxists' are capable of challenging capitalism *as well as* gender/sexual norms by showing that there is a deep, binding, constitutive relation of the two. According to Liu, in queer Marxists' views, normative expression of gender and sexuality is implicated in capitalist modes of reproduction, which recursively condition, shape and regenerate the apparatus of gender and sexual norms. For instance, Liu argues that Chen Ruoxi's *Paper Marriage* 紙婚 (1986) reveals the dual function of marriage in citizenship and capitalism by making the undocumented Chinese immigrant female worker, Pingping, marry the gay American citizen, Sean.[27] Employing a marriage of expediency for the protagonists, the novel stages a transnational alliance between the American queer (who is terrorized by the imperative of heterosexual marriage) and the Chinese undocumented migrant worker (who is excluded by the nation-state of the United States and exploited by its capitalism for cheap labour). As such, the couple's mimicry of marriage is 'a protest against the institutions of heterosexual marriage and citizenship at once'.[28] In a similar vein, Chen's sense of 'same community of common destiny' implies an alliance that cuts across the line of ethnicity and sexuality, as it recognizes the struggle against economic miracle as the common cause. Within the text itself, Chen Xue's rags-to-riches subversion exposes the imbrication of nuclear heterosexual family with capitalism. As demonstrated above, by implying the father's attempt at individual entrepreneurship to be the origin of family trauma, *A Child* shows the devastating impact of capitalism on a nuclear family, especially capitalism's relentless demand for reproduction. Such traumatizing experience, however, has developed a queer Marxist consciousness for the author, as she recognizes the Sangying tribe is as diasporic and exploited as the girl is in her narrative. The author's perception thus reveals her self-positioning, other than a queer and avant-garde writer but also a writer deeply critical of economism.

Conclusion

A Child tells an underside story of Taiwan's economic miracle period between 1970 and 1990. Its narrative, by subverting the rags-to-riches paradigm, reveals the less represented aspect of Taiwan's emerging capitalism as it transited into NIC. By casting the narrator's working-class father into an anti-hero falsely believing in upward class mobility, *A Child* presents an excruciating exposé of capitalism. In Chen's exposé, family becomes an origin of trauma for the queer daughter, precisely because it functions as the basic unit of economy. Chen's text painfully reveals that nuclear family, when failing to integrate into Taiwan's emerging capitalist system, could become a traumatic site for its members as they are incessantly dogged by the demand for reproduction.

A Child in turn problematizes class mobility by rendering it traumatic and alienating. While the experience of class mobility has produced a permanent sense of maladaptation for the narrator, it has also produced what the author qualifies as a sense of 'same community of common destiny', which regards disadvantaged experiences to be a cohesive power for the less privileged. This sense comes from the recognition that identity must be understood as plural and its components might not always be privileging. Such nuanced sense of 'same community of common destiny' then disputes economic growth as the (only) cohesive force for the society. *A Child* is, in this way, a queer Marxist.

Notes

1 Referred as *A Child* afterwards.

2 Liou Liang-Ya, 'Xiangtu xiangxiangde xinmao: Chen xuede *Qiaoshang de haizi*, *Chen chuntian* lide defang, xingbie, ji yi' [A New Phase of Native Soil Imagination: Place, Gender, and Memory in Chen Xue's *The Child on the Bridge* and *Chen Chuen-tien*], *Chungwai Literary Month* 37, no. 1 (2019): 57. And Noriko Shirouze, 'Cong Chen xue *Qiaoshang de haizi* kan nǚxing xiangtu xiangxiang' [Imagining Native Places in Taiwanese Women's Literature: With a Focus on Chen Xue's *A Child on the Bridge*], *Taiwan wenxue xuebao* 17 (2010): 48.

3 Yu Shuenn-Der, 'Hot and Noisy: Taiwan's Night Market Culture', in *The Minor Arts of Daily Life*, ed. David K. Jordan et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2004), 147.

4 The phrase *rags-to-riches* is derived from the fiction of Horatio Alger, a nineteenth-century American author. His stories, drawing heavily from Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Charles Dickens, exert a huge influence on shaping the American dream (Gary Scharnhorst, 'The Moral Foundation of the Juvenile Fiction', in *Horatio Alger, Jr* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 68). His most well-known novel, *Ragged Dick* (1868), features the eponymous protagonist raising from a poor bootblack to a middle-class clerk. The story characterizes Dick by his good morality and a strong will to succeed. However, as shown in this chapter, Taiwan has its own rags-to-riches narrative to be found in the economic miracle discourse of the 1980s.

5 Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 195.

6 Reuven Brenner, 'The Makings of an Economic Miracle', *Wall Street Journal* (July 1997), A22.

7 Ibid.

8 Clark Cal and Steve Chan, 'From Rags to Riches', in *Flexibility, Foresight and Fortuna in Taiwan's development* (London: Routledge, 2014), 32.

9 Yu, 'Hot and Noisy', 130.

10 Ibid., 213.

11 Chen Xue, *Qiaoshangde haizi* [A Child on the Bridge] (Taipei: INK Literary, 2004), 87.

12 Ibid., 84.

13 Ibid., 85.

14 Ibid., 87.

15 Ibid., 65.

16 Ibid., 65.

17 Ibid., 61–2.

18 The narrative in other passages characterizes the clothes selling as 'martial field' 武場 (63; 126), a traditional theatre term. It refers to the percussion ensemble on stage, in contrast to 文場, meaning 'civil field', the string and woods ensemble. According to Tang Yuen Ha, the function of percussive music includes 'controlling the overall rhythm and pace of the play, building up or heightening an atmosphere and giving greater impetus to the actor' (Yuen Ha Tang, 'The Aesthetics of Chinese Classical', PhD diss. The Australian National University, 2016, 123. https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/109246/1/Tang%20Thesis%202016.pdf.). Used in the narrative, one gets the connotation that the parents' clothes-selling business at night-market is competitive, full of loud noises, intense and war-like.

19 Chen Xue, *Qiaoshangde haizi*, 70.

20 Ibid., 155–6.

21 Ibid., 127.

22 Ibid., 125.

23 Ibid., 127.

24 Ibid., 133.

25 Ibid., 184–6.

26 For original text, please refer to Chen, Xue. ‘Sanying buluo zuowei yigejianzheng: zhuanfang “Qiaoshang de haizi” Chen Xue’ [Sanying Tribe as a Witness: Interviewing ‘A Child on the Bridge’ Chen Xue]. Interview by Jiang Yi-hao, 8 April 2009, http://sanyingtribe.blogspot.com/2010/10/blog-post_6050.html?m=1.

27 Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 99–100.

28 Ibid., 99.

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Chapter 10

QUEERING ANIMALITY: IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN CHIU MIAO-CHIN'S FICTION

Carlos Rojas

In a discussion of recent war crimes, Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov observes at one point that 'people talk sometimes of a bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel'.[1] The implication, as the philosopher Jean-Marie Muller has observed, is that 'violence is not a mark of bestiality, but of inhumanity', though Muller goes on to stress that even as violence is perceived to be a uniquely (in)human attribute, it is also precisely humans' access to language that in principle permits them to resolve conflicts at a symbolic level without needing to revert to physical violence.[2] Slavoj Žižek, however, turns Muller's point upside down, suggesting that it is precisely humanity's linguistic and symbolic order that makes violence possible in the first place – given that without language, the very concept of violence *qua* violence would not exist. Violence, Žižek concludes, is 'a mark' of neither bestiality nor inhumanity, but rather of humanity itself.[3]

Not only is violence made possible by language, but language itself is also predicated on a logic of symbolic violence – in that it breaks up natural or social phenomena into conceptually arbitrary categories. Every language, for instance, breaks up the colour spectrum in different ways,[4] just as they carve up the universe of human gender, sex and sexuality in different ways.[5] Moreover, when it comes to social attributes such as gender, sex and sexual orientations, the epistemological violence associated with these sorts of conceptual distinctions results in actual physical or emotional violence, with individuals being marginalized or even persecuted based on the categories to which they are assigned.

Although Taiwan is celebrated as the first nation in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, as recently as 2004 it was still legal to discriminate based on sexual orientation in employment and education.[6] Moreover, even though in 1994 Taiwan's military rescinded its policy of treating homosexuality as a mental illness (a provision that many gay men had previously used to avoid the compulsory military service), the military quickly followed this decision by agreeing to continue exempting men from conscription if psychiatrists confirmed that they were in fact homosexual. Cindy Patton argues that the military's decision to officially depathologize homosexuality was primarily in response not to local gay rights activism (she notes that, given that military service in Taiwan was – and remains – compulsory, there was therefore not much local interest at the time in increasing the government's ability to compel gay men to serve in the military), but rather to Taiwan's attempt to improve its international optics in relation to the United States, given that in late 1993 the Clinton administration had just implemented its controversial 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, whereby the US military was prohibited from discriminating against homosexual or bisexual servicemen and women as long as they did not publicly reveal their sexual orientation.[7] Ironically, however, whereas the new US policy resulted in an institutional reaffirmation of the pernicious logic of the closet (whereby queer individuals are required to keep their sexuality a secret), Taiwan's corresponding policy shift had the opposite effect, insofar as it required gay men to officially and repeatedly document their sexual orientation in order to remain exempt from military service.

It was also in 1994, meanwhile, that the openly lesbian Taiwanese author Chiu Miao-chin 邱妙津 completed her first novel, 鱷魚手記 (*Eyu shouji*, *Notes of a Crocodile*), followed the next year by her second and final novel, 蒙馬特遺書 (*Mengmate yishu*, *Last Words from Montmartre*), which she wrote while studying in Paris. Published less than a decade after Taiwan's four-decade-long period of martial law was lifted in 1987, Chiu's two novels were composed during a period when queer individuals and practices were beginning to attract more attention in Taiwan, and both works use a combination of realistic and fantastic elements to reflect on the psychological and social violence that queer individuals may encounter in a predominantly heteronormative environment.

Both novels feature a young queer protagonist and a corresponding non-human animal who embodies various aspects of the protagonist's identity. *Notes of a Crocodile*, for instance, contains one narrative line that revolves around a young Taiwanese woman and her queer-leaning friends, and a second one that focuses on a humanoid crocodile that always disguises itself as human in public, together with the period of local 'crocodile fever' that results from reports of crocodile sightings. Many readers viewed the humanoid crocodile as a powerful metaphor for closeted queer individuals attempting to pass as straight in order to avoid prejudicial treatment, and the novel's protagonist – who declares at one point that '我是一個會愛女人的女人' (I am a woman who can love women)[8] – became such an icon of Taiwan's emerging lesbian community that her nickname in the novel, Lazi, provided the inspiration for what would become a common Chinese-language term for lesbians: *lala* 拉拉. *Last Words from Montmartre*, meanwhile, similarly focuses on a young, queer protagonist who alternates between mourning the recent death of her pet bunny (which she had purchased three years earlier with her lover at the time, a young Taiwanese woman named Xu she met in Paris), and her own growing sense of depression and desperation following the collapse of that earlier relationship and the death of her bunny. The novel concludes with the protagonist yearning for death, and on 25 June 1995, just days after completing the work, Chiu took her own life. After Chiu's death, her friend Lai Hsiang-yin 賴香吟 edited and published Chiu's final novel, together with a collection of Chiu's short fiction, 寂寞的群眾 (*Jimo de qunzhong*, *The Lonely Crowd*) and, several years later, a two-volume collection of the diary that Chiu kept over the final six years of her life.

The fact that two-thirds of Chiu's book-length publications (four out of six volumes) were published after her death under someone else's oversight speaks to the tension between exposure and self-revelation that runs through her oeuvre. Large portions of both of Chiu's full-length novels consist of journal entries and letters written in a first-person voice that appears to carry strong autobiographical inflections (based on what we know about Chiu's life), but in both cases the protagonist is presented as constantly struggling to determine how to articulate her true identity. In both works, moreover, the hyper-articulate protagonist is paired with a non-human animal who is either largely or completely silent – but who functions as a foil for the protagonist's attempts to articulate the emotional and existential challenges that she faces. The result is a double transference, whereby the author appears to use her quasi-autobiographical fictional protagonists to give voice to some of the challenges that she is facing, while those same protagonists use specific non-human animals as foils through which they attempt to work through the emotional and psychological difficulties they face.

Notes of a Crocodile

In Evans Chan's 陳耀成 2019 documentary about Chiu Miao-Chin's life and work, 蒙馬特之愛與死 (*Mengmate zhi ai yu* si, *Love and Death in Montmartre*), the actor who plays Chiu frequently appears wearing a crocodile mask made of common craft materials like cardboard and plastic. This reptilian mask is obviously an allusion to Chiu's first novel, though in that earlier work the figure in question is not a human wearing a *crocodile* mask,

but rather it is a humanoid crocodile wearing a *human* mask. A deeply reclusive figure, the novel's crocodile is described as having reptilian attributes such as green skin and jagged teeth, which lead it to disguise itself as human whenever it goes out in public. In Chan's documentary, meanwhile, what in the novel had been the identity that needed to be disguised (namely, the crocodile's reptilian identity) becomes instead the public guise through which the author is identified.

Chiu's *Notes of a Crocodile* consists of eight 'Notebooks' (*shouji* 手記) that include a combination of first-person journal entries and short letters written by the protagonist, Lazi. The first chapter, for instance, opens with an entry dated 20 July 1991, which features the protagonist attempting to establish herself as a creative writer after having just graduated from college, and many of the subsequent letters and journal entries involve Lazi's friendships and romantic relationships with a group of young people – including both women and men – during and after college. Although in the first half of *Notes of a Crocodile* the sequences featuring Lazi are mostly separate from the ones featuring the eponymous crocodile, the two narratives begin to converge in the novel's fifth notebook. By this point, Lazi has been kicked out of her home after graduation and is now working in a teahouse. At the height of Taipei's period of crocodile fever, Lazi and the crocodile both attend a Christmas Eve masquerade ball – for which Lazi borrows the identity of the British filmmaker Derek Jarman and the crocodile borrows the identity of the French author Jean Genet. After meeting at the ball, Lazi agrees to shelter the crocodile in the basement of the teahouse where she works, and further explains that it was this experience '使我決定寫這部鱷魚提供資料,賈曼提供技術的小說' (that prompted me to write this novel based on the material that the crocodile provided, together with Jarman's cinematic techniques).[9]

The novel concludes with Lazi helping the crocodile record a video for broadcast on the local television station. The video, which is titled 'Last Words of a Crocodile' (*Eyu de yiyan* 鱷魚的遺言), opens with the crocodile removing its bodysuit and announcing to the camera, '嗨!你們好嗎?我就是鱷魚,我大概是唯一一隻真正的鱷魚吧' (Ho! How is everyone? I'm a crocodile. I'm probably the only real crocodile out there).[10] The crocodile then reveals that it was the one who first sent a time to the *China Times* reporting a crocodile sighting, when in turn catalysed the resulting period of crocodile fever. The crocodile further explains that it wears a bodysuit because its skin has always been green, and '媽媽說會嚇到小孩' (my mother said it would scare the other children),[11] and the video concludes with a shot of the crocodile sitting in a wooden bathtub that is floating out to sea, which then bursts into flames.

The novel's description of this period of crocodile fever and the crocodile's eventual act of self-immolation appear to have been inspired by a notable incident in 1992, in which TTV World News journalist Chu Mei-feng 璩美鳳 used a hidden camera to secretly film patrons in a lesbian bar, and after the footage was broadcast the resulting surge of attention led one of the 'outed' bar patrons to commit suicide. Whereas in the lesbian bar incident the patron was driven to commit suicide after appearing involuntarily in someone else's voyeuristic video, in Chiu's novel the crocodile's suicide marks the climax of a confessional and exhibitionist video produced by the crocodile itself. In an unexpected twist, however, subsequent developments in Chu Mei-feng's career offer a suggestive parallel to the dynamics of disclosure and self-revelation featured in Chiu's novel. In particular, in 2001, by which point Chu had left journalism and was currently director of Hsinchu City's Bureau of Cultural Affairs, a secretly recorded video of her having sex with her male lover (who at the time was married to someone else) was released on the internet, which resulted in Chu's resignation from her Hsinchu position.[12] In 2002, however, Chu responded to the scandal by publishing a memoir, 璩美鳳懺情錄 (*Qu Meifeng chanqing lu, Chu Mei-feng's Confessions*), in which she discusses the sex tape incident and the distress that its release had caused her. Like the crocodile in Chiu's 1994 novel, accordingly, Chu took the experience of being 'outed' for her non-normative sexual practice (she was sleeping with a

married man) and transformed it into an opportunity for making a deliberate self-revelation.

When Evans Chan presents Chiu Miao-chin as a crocodile-mask-wearing figure in his subsequent documentary, he is alluding to the tension between being closeted and being outed that can be observed both the original Chu Mei-feng lesbian bar incident and Chu's subsequent sex tape incident. In other sequences in the documentary, however, the actor playing Chiu Miao-chin appears wearing not a crocodile mask but rather a translucent wedding veil. In a 2020 interview, Chan notes that during the period he was working on the documentary, between 2015 and 2019, 'the same-sex marriage legalization battle in Taiwan was brewing'[13] – underscoring the serendipitous resonances between Chiu's attempts to promote awareness of queer topics in the early 1990s and the sea change in attitudes towards queer issues that was unfolding while Chan was producing his documentary in the late 2010s. In 2015, the same year that Chan was commissioned to make a documentary about Chiu Miao-chin, several Taiwan municipalities began offering queer couples a new option of applying for 'partnership registrations' – an arrangement that was presented as a form of institutional validation of same-sex relationships but with few of the legal guarantees that were afforded to married couples. Two years later, in January 2017, Chan released a preliminary 52-minute television version of his documentary, titled 蒙馬特．女書 (*Mengmate nüshu*, *Death in Montmartre*), and in March of that same year Taiwan's Judicial Yuan heard a case involving a local gay activist who was suing for the right to marry his same-sex partner – which led to a May ruling that Taiwan's prohibition of same-sex marriage was unconstitutional. Taiwan's Legislative Yuan was given a two-year deadline to fix the legal code, and on 24 May 2019, the very last day of the original two-year moratorium, a new law permitting same-sex marriage went into effect. Five months later, in October 2019, the full-length film version of Chan's *Love and Death in Montmartre* had its world premiere at the Hamburg International Queer Film Festival.

The intersection of Chiu Miao-chin's afterlife with Taiwan's legalization of same-sex marriage can be observed not only in the way Evans Chan's documentary coincided with several key moments in the legalization process, but also in the way that Chiu's literary career mirrors that of another of Taiwan's other most notable lesbian authors: Chen Xue 陳雪. Chen and Chiu were born just a year apart (in 1970 and 1969, respectively), and Chen published her first book (a collection of short fiction) a year after Chiu published her own first novel (in 1995 and 1994, respectively). Like Chiu's work, Chen's fiction attracted considerable attention for its focus on female same-sex desire, and in 2002 – as Chen was becoming well-known in local communities for this and subsequent works – she first met a young editor whom she would later come to know as Breakfaster (*Zaocan ren*早餐人), a meeting that has been described in retrospect as 'love at first sight' (*yijian zhongqing* 一見鍾情).[14] At the time, however, both women had other partners, and their relationship did not become romantic until the following year.[15] After having an on-again, off-again relationship for several years, the two women held an unofficial wedding in 2009, and a decade later they officially married on 24 May 2019, the very day that Taiwan's new marriage law went into effect.[16]

Just as *Notes from a Crocodile* concludes with the crocodile recording a confessional video for public broadcast, nearly two decades later Chen Xue and Breakfaster engaged in a similar act of self-exposure. In 2011 and 2012, Chen Xue published a series of online journal entries reflecting on her domestic life with Breakfaster, and in 2012 they published a co-authored book titled 人妻日記 (*Renqi riji*, *A Wife's Diary*), which consisted of Chen Xue's journal entries, some black-and-white photos of the couple and their home, as well as a series of letters that Breakfaster had written her in 2007 and 2008, before they began living together. The resulting volume represents an unusual exercise in calculated self-exposure, with Chen Xue and Breakfaster revealing intimate details about their relationship to a wider public.

While Chen Xue's and Breakfaster's co-authored book focuses on the couple's thoughts, feelings and domestic practices, on the internet the book cohabitates a space with a genre that could be viewed as the book's mirrored opposite. In particular, the Chinese characters 人妻日記 are also used to designate a branded series of Japanese amateur-style pornographic videos featuring a man engaging in rather mechanical sex acts with a woman.[17] While the Taiwan volume makes no explicit reference to sexual contact and instead focuses entirely on the couple's emotional relationship and on details of their domestic life, the Japanese videos by contrast present a vision of marriage that has been stripped on any pretence of domestic intimacy and instead has been reduced to a laser-like focus on sexual copulation. Despite their obvious differences, however, these two versions of 人妻日記 offer a challenge to a set of heteronormative regulations regarding marriage and sexuality. This is most obvious in the case of Chen Xue's and Breakfaster's volume, in which they publicly document details of their 'marriage' at a time when same-sex marital unions are not legally available in Taiwan, but even the porn videos can be viewed as transgressive, insofar as they skirt the borders of Japan's relatively restrictive Article 175 of the criminal code, which prohibits the publication of 'obscene' material – and while the videos in question are arguably exploitative and misogynist, the same legal provisions can and have been used to regulate the representation of queer sexual practices.

It is revealing, accordingly, that masks feature prominently in both sets of works. In the videos, the man's face is always out of the frame and the woman is invariably wearing a mask (usually a black mask over her eyes, but sometimes a black Covid-style face mask over her mouth), while in the Taiwan volume both authors are figuratively masked insofar as they both appear under their pennames rather than their legal names.[18] Just as Chiu Miao-chin, in Evans Chan's documentary, is identified via her masks and veils, the literal and symbolic masks in both of these latter sets of works are one of their defining characteristics, while also functioning as concrete expressions of the works' counterhegemonic potentialities.

Last Words of Bunny

Whereas Chen Xue publicly shared her account of her domestic life with Breakfaster essentially in real time (the journal entries were posted online shortly after they were composed between September 2011 and July 2012, and the printed version of *A Wife's Diary* was published in September 2012, only two months after the date of the volume's final journal entry), Chiu Miao-chin kept a similarly revealing diary that was not released to the public until more than a decade after her death. In 2007, Ink Publishing House published a two-volume set containing six years of Chiu's diaries, from 1989 up to just days before her death in June of 1995. The diaries cover almost the entire span of Chiu's literary career (her earliest published short stories date back to 1988). The belated publication of Chiu's diary is significant not only for the insight that it provides into her personal life and mental processes during the period when she was establishing herself as an author, but also because the final series of diary entries closely mirror the quasi-autobiographical journal entries that compose *Last Words from Montmartre*.

In a diary entry dated 25 April 1995, Chiu Miao-chin notes that her pet bunny had just died, and adds that she will respond to the loss by immediately starting work on a new novel:

> 兔兔兩、三個小時以前死了,對我打擊太大,我沒辦法解脫,只能明天起開始我的第二個長篇《兔兔遺書》。
>
> Bunny died two or three hours ago. This is an enormous blow to me, which I'm unable to bear. The only thing I can do is start writing my second novel tomorrow, titled *Last*

Words of Bunny.[19]

The title 兔兔遺書 (*Tutu yishu*, *Last Words of Bunny*), which Chiu used in her diary to refer to her final work, directly mirrors both the syntax of the title of her first novel, 鱷魚手記 (*Eyu shouji*, *Notes of a Crocodile*) and the title of the crocodile's final video in that work, 'Last Words of a Crocodile' (*Eyu de yiyan* 鱷魚的遺言) – suggesting a parallel between the figures of the crocodile and the bunny in the two novels. In both cases, the eponymous animal occupies a position that mirrors that of the human protagonist, though with the difference that whereas the crocodile is alive and well up until the very end of the first novel, the bunny is presented as having died before the second novel begins.

In fact, the second novel opens with a dedication that reads, 'Dedicated to dead little Bunny and myself, soon dead' (獻給死去的兔兔與即將死去的我自己),[20] and on 25 June 1995, precisely two months after her bunny's death, Chiu Miao-chin took her own life. Following the dedication, the novel contains a prefatory note that instructs readers how they may approach the work: '若此書有機會出版,讀到此書的人可由任何一書讀起。它們之間沒有必然的連貫性,除了書寫時間的連貫之外.' (If this book should be published, readers can begin anywhere. The only connection between the chapters is the time frame in which they were written.)[21] The version of the work that was published after her death contains twenty-one chapters that appear mostly in numerical order, and which include a mixture of journal entries and letters.[22] The dates of the letters contained in these chapters proceed chronologically from 27 April to 17 June (even the letters in the two chapters that are numerically 'out of order' still adhere to this chronological sequence). The volume is then bookended by two short sections that are both labelled 'Witness' (*Jianzheng* 見證), one of which consists of a collection of short notes addressed to the protagonist's friend Yong, while the other consists of a short quote (in both French and Chinese translation) from Greek director Theo Angelopoulos's *The Suspended Step of the Stork* – a film that the protagonist remarks elsewhere, '[使 Angelopoulos] 成了我的神,無可比較' (is what made [Angelopoulos] my personal God, without equal).[23]

The novel's opening 'Witness' section begins with a note from the protagonist to her friend Yong, in which she describes having been betrayed by her former lover, Xu, and then refers to the death of the pet bunny she and Xu had bought when they were still together:

> 我所唯一完全獻身的那個人背叛了我,她的名字叫絮,連我們三年婚姻的結品,她所留在巴黎陪伴我的兔兔,也緊接著離開世界,一起都發生在四十五天裡。此刻兔兔冰涼的屍體正安靜的躺在我的枕頭旁,絮所寄來陪我的娃娃小豬就依偎在牠旁邊,昨夜我一整個晚上抱著牠純白的屍體,躺在棉被裡默默嚎泣。。。。
>
> The only person I ever gave myself to completely has betrayed me. Her name is Xu. Even Bunny (the crystallization of our three years of marriage, which she left with me in Paris to keep me company) departed this world suddenly, and all of this happened within the space of forty-five days. Now Bunny's cold body is resting peacefully near my pillow, and the little stuffed pig that Xu sent me is resting against Bunny's body. All last night I cried silently under the covers, holding Bunny's pure white corpse in my arms ....[24]

Like Chen Xue and Breakfaster a decade and a half later, the protagonist of *Last Words* refers to her three-year relationship with Xu as a 'marriage' (*hunyin* 婚姻), and adds that she views the pet bunny they purchased together as a poignant symbol of their relationship. When the bunny dies just weeks after Xu and the protagonist break up, the animal's dead body comes to represent the subsequent failure of that relationship.

The novel's first journal entry, dated 27 April 1995, takes the form of a letter addressed directly to Xu, and opens with another reference to Bunny's death:

> 時間是一九九五年四月二十七日凌晨三點,你在台灣的早晨九點,兔兔死於二十六日午夜十二點,距離牠死後二十七個小時。牠還沒下葬,牠和牠的小箱子還停留在我的房間陪我。因我聽你的囑咐不把牠葬入塞納河,要為牠尋找一個小墳墓。我還沒找到合適地點。
>
> It is now three in the morning on 27 April 1995. It is nine o'clock for you in Taiwan. Bunny died at midnight on the twenty-sixth, so it has now been twenty-seven hours since the death. I haven't buried the body yet. He's still in the tiny coffin here, keeping me company in my room. On your advice, I didn't throw Bunny into the Seine, and will instead find it a little grave site. I still haven't found the right place.[25]

Similarly, the work's final diary entry, dated 17 June 1995, begins with yet another reference to Bunny:

> 兔兔很小,大概十五公分長,雖然是純白的,彈全身的末端、腳掌、手掌、鼻尖、兩耳末端、尾尖都染著灰色。絮和我在新橋塞納河邊那一排動植物店逛時,在第一家,絮一眼就看中了牠。
>
> Bunny was tiny, maybe on 15 centimetres long. Although Bunny's coat was pure white, the fur on Bunny's body, feet, paws, nose, ears, and tail was flecked with grey. Xu spotted bunny immediately as we strolled past the row of pet shops along the Seine near Pont Neuf.[26]

Throughout Chiu's novel, accordingly, the bunny represents Eros and Thanatos, past and future. The animal functions as a metonym (a 'crystallization' [*jiepin* 結品]) of the protagonist's former relationship with Xu, while also functioning as a reminder of the eventual failure of that relationship. At the same time, the dead animal also symbolizes the protagonist's own deepening despair and her growing resolve to take her own life.

The protagonist's mediated identification with the bunny as a symbol of her romantic relationship with Xu, meanwhile, is itself mirrored by the protagonist's parallel identification with an imaginary alter-ego she calls Zoë. This Zoë is first introduced near the end of the novel's first chapter, in the letter addressed to Xu, where the narrator starts alternating between referring to herself in the first and third person:

> 我要告訴你,你是接受Zoë的身體及靈魂最多的一個人,你也是曾經愛過懂過最多我的身體及靈魂的,就是因為你是唯一一個這樣愛過我、接納我、了解我歌聲的人, 所以Zoë 到了你的手上,才算是真正徹底地燃燒起來。。。
>
> What I'm trying to say is that you are the one who accepted Zoë's body and soul most deeply. And you were the one who loved and understood me best, body and soul. It's precisely because you're the only person to have loved me and accepted me as I am, to have understood my songs, that you had Zoë truly, wholly on fire in the palm of your hand ….[27]

This Zoë alter-ego appears repeatedly throughout the novel, but one of the most revealing appears at the end of Chapter 5 ('Letter 6'), where the protagonist describes how she is looking forward to meeting up soon with her friend Qing Jin (who is married to a French man, but on whom the protagonist has a crush):

> 臨別前,我說論文寫完我將獨自到希臘旅行。她要我寫慢一點,等她從台灣回來,帶她一起去。[…] 然而,她不知,我在等待,等待這兩個月, 為她準備,準備「轉世」的另一個Zoë 的身分, 希望七月給她看到一個抽煙斗,留長頭髮,起腳踏車, 熱衷學小提琴,重新恢復創作小說,並開始按進度寫詩 […] 俊秀漂亮的Zoë。

> Before leaving, I told Qing Jin that I planned to visit Greece alone after my thesis was finished. She wanted me to write more slowly so that she could come with me when she returned from Taiwan. […] But she couldn't know that I was biding my time, waiting for the coming two months, preparing for her, preparing to reincarnate into my new identity as another Zoë. In July I want to present her with a Zoë who smokes cigarettes, who has long hair, who rides a bicycle, who is immersed in learning the violin, who has returned to the novel and who is writing poetry regularly […] a Zoë who is handsome and beautiful.[28]

Not only does the narrator consistently refer to Zoë in the third person, but furthermore invariably uses the masculine pronoun 'he' (*ta* 他) when a pronoun is needed, suggesting that Zoë represents the protagonist's gender queer alter-ego – a heterosexually oriented masculine figure who is the mirror inverse of the protagonist's alternate vision of herself as 'a woman who loves women'.

The final chapter of *Last Words from Montmartre*, titled 'Letter 20' and dated June 17, opens with a reference to Bunny's dead body and concludes with an allusion to an external locus of animality:

> 就是這樣。我渴望躺在藍色的湖畔旁靜靜地死去。。。。死後將身體捐給鳥獸分食,唯獨取下我的眉輪骨獻給絮。。。。像亞歷山大一眼忠於一椿永恆之愛。
>
> And on it flows. I long to lie down quietly on the banks of a blue lake and die… and when I'm dead for my body to be consumed by birds and beasts, leaving only the bone of my brow for Xu… like Alexander, loyal to an everlasting love.[29]

In this entry, there is a revealing transference from the protagonist's identification with the dead rabbit, to her fantasy about dying and having her body be consumed by 'birds and beasts' (鳥獸 *niaoshou*). These imaginary scavengers appear to represent an embodiment of the external forces by which the protagonist feels oppressed, while at the same time representing some sort of purifying effect capable of reducing her body to its pure essence – to the single brow bone that she would then leave for her lover.

Meanwhile, after first mentioning, in the 25 April entry in her real-life diary, that she had begun working on a new novel, meanwhile, Chiu evidently became engrossed in this project, and her next diary entry does not appear until more than two weeks later – by which point Chiu had already completed nearly half of the eventual work. On 12 May, she wrote,

> 停止《兔兔遺書》的創作吧,不為什麼,只因為寫到第十封,我以體悟到我生命中最大的問題是什麼,這是較諸熱情(愛慾)的主題之於我更核心的主題,是「passive-positive」的問題。我只想徹底地passive,我如今只想靜靜地存活著,靜靜地創造者,靜靜地表現者,靜靜地愛著,靜靜給予著,而「真的」不去占有什麼,不去要求什麼,不去想要得到什麼。
>
> I'm going to stop work on *Last Words of Bunny*. No particular reason, just that after having written eleven different letters, I've come to realize what my biggest problem in life is. This is a topic that is even more central to me than all affectionate (romantic) topics – namely the problem of being 'passive-positive.' I just want to be completely 'passive,' and just want to peacefully exist, peacefully create, peacefully display, peacefully love, peacefully give, while 'really' not claiming anything, not wanting anything, and trying to obtain anything.[30]

This emphasis on passivity could be viewed as an embrace of love over violence, but it could also be viewed as an articulation of a Freudian death drive – a desire to return to an inorganic stillness.

In the 11 June entry, meanwhile, Chiu addresses her friend 'S' with a list of resolutions that include:

> (4)。。。不要回台灣那塊令我嘔吐的土地,一些令我憎恨的動物性的人,徹底在心中於這些無關。
>
> (5)盡量對每個人類和善、有禮。之於動物性的人只需防衛著不再任她們侵犯我,一點都無需流露真正的自己。不在試圖去以肉身包圍、愛那些動物性的部分了。我發誓。我發誓要離開這些引起我憎恨的人,這些在傷害著我的生命。
>
> (4)... I don't want to return to Taiwan, that territory that makes me nauseous, and those animalistic people whom I hate, and completely disengage myself from them.
>
> (5) I want to strive to be kind and polite to everyone. As for those animalistic people, I simply need to protect myself and not let them violate me, and I don't need to reveal the true me to them. I will no longer attempt to use my body to tolerate and love that animalistic portion. I swear. I swear that I will leave these people who elicit my hatred, and who harming my life.[31]

In contrast to the dead bunny, which functions as a metonym for lost love and a metaphor for the self, these latter two references to 'birds and beasts' (鳥獸 *niaoshou*) and to 'animalist people' (動物性的人 *dongwuxing de ren*) represent the external forces that tormented the author while she was alive and which evidently drove her to her death.

The irony that animates both of Chiu's novels and her real-life diary, accordingly, is that all three works wrestle, in a rather verbose fashion, with a set of social and psychological pressures that Chiu and her fictional avatars are ultimately unable to fully articulate, making it ironically fitting that it is precisely through the figure of largely non-verbal non-human animals – like the crocodile, bunny, 'birds and beasts' and so forth – that she is able to find a proxy through which to articulate her own sense of oppression, as well as the internal and external forces against which she increasingly struggles.

Coda

The thematics of masking, corporeality and queer desire that animate *Notes of a Crocodile* and *Last Words of Montmartre* can already be found in Chiu Miao-chin's 1988 short story 「臨界點」 (*linjie dian*, Degree Zero), the earliest work collected in Chiu's first short-story collection, the 1991 volume *The Revelry of Ghosts* (鬼的狂歡). The story's male-gendered narrator is identified by his crooked mouth, blistered feet and his infatuation with a female student – whom he believes he cannot fully love because she appears to be blind to what he believes to be his defining (negative) attributes. Fran Martin has argued that 'the apparently male narrator is legible as a masculine-identified woman pursuing another woman,' and she details how the protagonist's various 'stigmata' function as markers of his identity 'as a closeted T or proto-T [or masculinized "tomboy" or butch lesbian], such that the narrator's physical pathology stands in as a cipher for the "defect" and stigma of the T subject.'[32]

In an uncanny anticipation of the focus on the dead bunny in *Last Words of Montmartre*, at one point when the female student in 'Degree Zero' comes to visit the narrator in his office, the narrator compares himself to a hunted rabbit:

> 她果真絕迹於我的教室門口,這使我像被獵人追趕的野兔,長久沒有槍聲響起,固然放了半邊心,但另外半邊卻提得更高。

> If she had really disappeared from the entrance to my classroom, this would have made me feel like a hunted wild rabbit who, after a long time with no sound of gunshot, would have begun to feel somewhat relieved but also even more anxious.[33]

The figure of bunny is used here to underscore the protagonist's sense of vulnerability and helplessness when faced with the young woman to whom he feels attracted. When faced with the object of his desire, the protagonist reduced to his physical attributes, leaving him inarticulate and tongue-tied. As he affirms at the end of the story, '我是歪嘴' (I am crooked mouth).[34]

Not only does the allusion to the rabbit in 'Degree Zero,' from the very beginning of Chiu Miao-chin's career, anticipate the prominent role that the bunny will play in Chiu's final novel seven years later, it also captures the anxieties about category boundaries that run through Chiu's entire oeuvre. The rabbit/bunny is the very embodiment of the nonhuman, while at the same time capturing the essence of Chiu's protagonists' all-too-human attributes. The animals' silence is the direct inverse of the protagonists' loquacity, while at the same time exemplifying the protagonists' struggle to express themselves effectively. In Chiu's works, the rabbit/bunny and animals in general are positioned outside humanity's linguistic-symbolic order, even as they embody the mark of violence that that same order engenders in the first place.

Notes

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 215.

2 Jean-Marie Muller, *Non-Violence in Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 2002), 30.

3 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 61, emphasis in the original.

4 In their classic study *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay argue that every human language system has words for black/dark and white/bright, and that other basic color terms typically appear in a relatively predictable order. See Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

5 For one influential discussion of this issue, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

6 Discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity was not outlawed in employment-related matters in Taiwan until 2004, and in education it was not outlawed until 2007.

7 See Cindy Patton, 'Stealth Bombers of Desire: The Globalization of "Alterity" in Emerging Democracies', in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan (New York: New York Press, 2002).

8 Chiu Miao-chin 邱妙津, *Eyu shouji* 鱷魚手記 (Notes of a Crocodile) (Taipei: INK, 2006), 17; Qiu Miaojin, *Notes of a Crocodile*, trans. Bonnie Huie (New York: New York Review of Books, 2017), 21 (here and throughout this chapter, the English translations of Chiu's two novels have been silently modified, where appropriate).

9 Chiu Miao-chin, *Eyu shouji*, 124–5; Qiu Miaojin *Notes of a Crocodile*, 140.

10 Chiu Miao-chin, *Eyu shouji*, 222; Qiu Miaojin, *Notes of a Crocodile*, 241.

11 Chiu Miao-chin, *Eyu shouji*, 222; Qiu Miaojin, *Notes of a Crocodile*, 242.

12 Jimmy Chuang, 'Chu Mei-feng Finally Admits It Was Her in Sex Video', *Taipei Times* (9 May 2002) https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2002/05/09/135252

13 Daniel Tsang, 'A Conversation with Evans Chan', *Hong Kong Review of Books* (25 January

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14 Ling Duoduo 凌多多, '*Zhuanfang: Taiwan zuojia Chen Xue: Nüxiaoshuojia feichang aiqing gushi*' 專訪:台灣作家陳雪 :女小說家非常愛情故事 (Interview with Taiwan author Chen Xue: Female novelist loves stories), *Yazhou zhoukan* 亞洲週刊 (*Asia Weekly*) (21 September 2014) https://www.yzzk.com/article/details/專題報道/2014-37/1410406517213/專訪:台灣作家陳雪/名家博客/凌多多

15 Lin Yiting 林怡廷 (Amber), '*Zuojia Chen Xue: Chugui zhi hou, wo chongxin xuexi ai*' 作家陳雪:出軌之後,我重新學習愛 (The author Chen Xue: After being derailed, I relearned love), *Tianxia zazhi* 天下雜誌 (*Commonwealth Magazine*) (29 January 2018) https://www.cw.com.tw/article/5087881

16 '*Zhiming zuojia Chen Xue vs. Zaocanren zhongyu hun le! Xishu xinsuan licheng*' 知名作家陳雪VS.早餐人終於婚了! 細數辛酸歷程 (Famous author Chen Xue and Breakfaster finally marry! A detailed recounting of bitterness), *Sanli xinwen wang* 三立新聞網 (SETN.COM) (24 May 2019) https://www.setn.com/news.aspx?newsid=545866

17 The videos appear to have been released primarily on the amateur porn site Pornhub but have also been recirculated on numerous other sites.

18 Chen Xue's legal name is Chen Yaling 陳雅玲, while her companion and co-author is typically referenced by Chen Xue's affectionate nickname for her: Breakfaster.

19 Chiu Miao-chin, *Qiu Miaojin riji: 1991–1995* 邱妙津日記: 1991–1995 (Chiu Miao-chin's diary: 1991–1995), vol. 2 (Taipei, Ink, 2007), 254.

20 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu* 蒙馬特遺書 (Last Words from Montmartre) (Taipei: Lianhe wenxue, 1996), np; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words from Montmartre*, trans. Ari Larissa Heinrich (New York: New York Review of Books, 2014), np.

21 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu*, np.; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words*, np.

22 The entry labelled 'number 5' is out of order, and there are two entries that are both labelled 'number 17', one of which is out of order. Many of the entries contain dated material, and the dates proceed chronologically (and this is true even for the two entries that are numerically out of order).

23 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu*, 43; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words*, 29.

24 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu*, 9; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words*, 7.

25 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu*, 13; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words*, 10.

26 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu*, 186; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words*, 139.

27 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu*, 19; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words*, 13.

28 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu*, 52–3; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words*, 34–5.

29 Chiu Miao-chin, *Mengmate yishu*, 192; Qiu Miaojin, *Last Words*, 143.

30 Chiu Miao-chin, *Qiu Miaojin riji: 1991–1995*, 255.

31 Ibid., 273.

32 Fran Martin, 'Stigmatic Bodies: The Corporeal Qiu Miaojin', in *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation and Chinese Cultures*, edited by Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 190, 188.

33 Chiu Miao-chin, '*Linjie dian*' 臨界點 (Degree Zero), in Chiu Miao-chin, *Gui de kuanghuan* 鬼的狂歡 (The Revelry of Ghosts) (Taipei: Lianhe wenxue chubanshe, 1991), 10.

34 Chiu Miao-chin, 'Degree Zero,' 15.

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Chapter 11

The Little Mushroom as the Queer/Wild: Disordering Desire and Desiring Disorder in the Post-Anthropocene

Liang Ge

In October 2021, the *danmei* 耽美 fiction *Xiaomogu* (小蘑菇 The Little Mushroom) by Yishisizhou 一十四洲 won the silver prize of Xingyun Award for Global Chinese Science Fiction, which has triggered widespread discussion among both *danmei* fans and sci-fi fans because of its very generic identity as *danmei*, the male-male romance and/or erotica, rather than an emblematic sci-fi. *Xiaomogu* was serialized on Jinjiang, the hitherto largest website in China for publishing and consuming *danmei*, from October 2019 to January 2020, with eighty-four chapters.[1] Notably, a major part of its serialization coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic that was first identified in Wuhan in December 2019 and then became a global pandemic. The story is a combination of post-apocalyptic sci-fi and male-male romance. In recent years, Chinese-language science fiction has received significant academic attention,[2] while few of them attended to its intersection with romance narration. Simultaneously, literature concerning Chinese online romance fiction including *danmei* studies is still emerging, yet limited attention has been paid to explore the internal heterogeneity as, for example, there are diverse subgenres within *danmei*.[3] This chapter examines the high-profile fiction *Xiaomogu* against this backdrop.

Xiaomogu sets its background in the mid-twenty-second century when human beings are endangered as they can be easily infected by mutant monsters outside of the human base. This post-apocalyptic setting signals a posthuman time-space where the anthropocentric epoch has already become the history one hundred years before. This fiction features a seemingly impossible love between a mushroom named Anzhe who used to live in the Abyss, the heartland of mutant monsters, transforms into a human shape and enters the human realm, and a human judge Lu Feng who is in charge of eliminating nonhuman or infected humans in the human realm. In *Xiaomogu*, the world is in disorder, while 'normal' human beings are afraid of and wish to wipe out the disorder as for the rights of humans. However, the appearance of the mushroom Anzhe brings the disorder to the human base. The supreme judge Lu Feng who used to oversee the ordering of the last human base on earth embraces this disorder when he falls in love with the mushroom even though he has learned in the very beginning that Anzhe is nonhuman. The human base is then destroyed because of a series of incidents in which Anzhe is involved consciously or unconsciously. However, human beings are also rescued in the end because Anzhe sacrifices themselves by contributing their biological frequency to prevent human beings from being infected as mutant monsters. In the meantime, it can be seen that all humans are infected by Anzhe. Like most *danmei* fiction, *Xiaomogu* ends in a happy-ever-after. Differently, this time the romance transgresses the human boundaries and features the queer love between a mushroom and a human being, and more importantly, the very non-human has reshaped the post-apocalyptic cum post-anthropocentric world through hybridizing humanity with the frequency of the mushroom. The end of the story envisions a posthuman queer wild future where (post-)human beings are already infused with the wild.

Concerning the relationship between the queer and the wild, Jack Halberstam suggests that the two terms can be used interchangeably, which is beyond the human, and

considers modalities of desires and bodies unlimited to the anthropocentric dichotomy between the heterosexual and the homosexual.[4] This chapter first maps out the heterogeneous Chinese *danmei* cultural ecology and locates *Xiaomogu* as a hybridization of queer romance and sci-fi. Second, this chapter discusses the queer/wild romantic relationship between the seemingly opposite protagonists the mushroom Anzhe and the human judge Lu Feng. I suggest that the queer/wild love is generated in the process of embracing the disorder and embodied and embedded in the material-discursive continuum[5] in the post-Anthropocene where posthumous humans are posthumans infected and transformed by the very mushroom Anzhe. Then I explicate how Anzhe functions as the queer/wild posthuman subject and reflect on anthropocentrism and the relationship between nature and culture, humans and non-humans. Through discussing the queer/wild alternative future imagined in *Xiaomogu*, this chapter also sheds light on the radical as well as complex explorations embodied in the heterogenous Chinese *danmei* cultural ecology where various participants work together to interrogate the heteronormative modernist ideologies in the Anthropocene and to offer alternative queer/wild futures. Simultaneously, *Xiaomogu* and many other eclectic and innovative *danmei* stories generated and circulated in Chinese cyberspaces also constitute an organic part of contemporary queer Chinese-language literature, which exemplifies the great momentum that is constantly queering/querying the fixed and stale anthropocentric heteronormative ideologies.

The genealogy and heterogeneity of Chinese Danmei literature

Since the emergence of male-male romance in both the Euro-American world and Japan in the 1970s, known as slash and *yaoi* respectively, significant academic attention has been paid to this cultural phenomenon.[6]*Danmei*, a Chinese term borrowed from Japanese *tanbi*, has become the most prevalent word among producers and consumers of Chinese-language male-male romantic and/or erotic fiction in mainland China since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the late 1990s, Japanese *yaoi* comics and animation travelled to mainland China via Taiwan and Hong Kong,[7] which has formed part of the transnational boys' love culture.[8] Nevertheless, in comparison to research on Euro-American slash fiction and Japanese *yaoi* manga, *danmei* studies are still emerging, while the *danmei* culture in Chinese has already gained great popularity because of the flourishing transmedia scenes adapted from the original fiction, including comics, animations, audio series, web dramas, games and music.

Despite the different historical and sociocultural contexts, most scholars agree that male-male romances are primarily directed towards female fantasies.[9] It is generally assumed in slash, *yaoi* and *danmei* studies that fans of these genres are predominantly women, or more precisely, heterosexual women. Joanna Russ claims that slash fictions represent sexual fantasy by and for women.[10] This very argument has been adopted by most researchers on male homoerotic cultural products, such as Lucy Neville's study on the Euro-American male homoerotic media with sexually explicit content,[11] Mizoguchi Akiko's research on female readers and *yaoi* manga,[12] and *danmei* researchers on the series of *danmei*-adapted web dramas.[13] While recognizing that *danmei* participants are constituted by a much more diverse base than heterosexual women, this article suggests that *danmei* writing is speaking primarily for women's fantasies and desires. It explores how these fantasies are presented in the *Xiaomogu* to interrogate the regulatory norms of gender and sexuality in the Anthropocene. Noteworthily, I am not suggesting that *danmei* culture is unilaterally radical in challenging heteronormativity. As illustrated in my analysis of the Alpha/Beta/Omega (A/B/O) alternative universe subgenre,

> On the one hand, … there still exists a great deal of heteronormative content in the *danmei* world, such as the A/B/O settings in which the weak omega ends up being

> subsumed into the alpha's power. On the other hand, there are *danmei* writers who continue to creatively explore alternatives with the aim of interrogating and reconstructing the unequal regulatory norms through their writing.[14]

Various social norms are also reflected in *danmei* culture,[15] but at the same time, one prominent feature of *danmei* lies in its hybridity and creativity via constant self-renewal. *Xiaomogu,* as a post-apocalyptic *danmei,* vividly reflects this characteristic as its intersection between sci-fi and male-male romance and its interrogation of humanism that haunts the imaginations of the Anthropocene. The writer Yishisizhou presents female *danmei* writers' capacity of incorporating various world buildings into the construction of male-male romance and the reflexivity in creating a post-human queer romance between a human and a non-human.

Impossible love, queer love and embracing the disorder

Xiaomogu, as the hybrid sci-fi romance, embodies the constant self-innovation in the Chinese danmei ecology. In this section, I unpack the impossible queer love between the human judge Lu Feng and the non-human mushroom Anzhe, who are not supposed to fall in love with each other and discuss how the embrace of the disorder has created the queer love in the material-discursive practices. In this sense, *Xiaomogu* is an atypical danmei as well as an atypical sci-fi that explores the alternative ways of survival after the cosmic paradigm shift on sociopolitical and personal lives, and raises critical questions concerning queer love and desires, and posthuman subjectivity. It is a posthumanist romance, and it is a queer sci-fi.

In the post-apocalyptic story setting, Human beings refuse to be wiped off after the geomagnetic disappeared in 2030. Human beings detected the vanishing of the geomagnetic in 2020 and then they set plans to build the human bases and fight for survival:

> Plan A is to build huge magnetic field generators in two special locations in the Asian continent and North America, one called the 'Eastern Magnetic Pole', and one called the 'Western Magnetic Pole'. Instead of the north and south poles of the earth, the two magnetic field generators from the east and west will resonate with the charged particles in the solar wind to form a new magnetic field that will cover the whole world. … Plan B is the construction of large underground cities, shifting the centre of human life from the earth's surface to underground, as to protect humans from rays and solar wind. (Chapter 16)[16]

In 2040, Plan B succeeds, and the underground city is open for residence. In 2043, Plan A succeeds. The weak magnetic field covers the globe, the climate no longer deteriorates, and creatures no longer die from cosmic radiation. However, as the human beings show their great agency in transforming the nature, the most difficult time for human beings has just begun: the apocalyptic era is coming. Cosmic radiation brings unknown genetic mutations that make all organisms mutate into monsters. Uninfected humans become the food targets of those mutant creatures, and unfortunately, only the Northern Base and the Underground Base have survived after this catastrophe. The Northern Base (hereafter the Base), where the *Xiaomogu* story is centred, is guarded by high steel walls, ultrasonic shields and an artificial magnetic field that sever the human from the nonhuman outside. The Base has only one entrance and one exit, and the city escorts make regular patrols round-the-clock. When human beings return to the Base, they have to stand in a long queue in front of the only entrance, waiting to go through the security-check machine and be questioned and examined by the human officer concerning their travel histories and purposes of travel. If the citizens were detected signs of infection or failed to legitimize

their purposes of travel, they would be shot dead immediately. Such rigorous control invokes the readers' memories as well as the ongoing experiences of residential complexes in mainland China during the Covid-19 pandemic, including the national lockdown in 2020 and the following 'zero-Covid' policy that was terminated until December 2022.[17] During the incessant partial or full lockdowns in various cities in China, residents experienced strict social controls, including queuing hours for the Covid tests, rigorous checks at every entrance of their living and working places, and people with Covid and their close contacts being declined to access to their residential areas and forced into quarantine camps. The eerie resemblance between fiction and reality constitutes this text's reflection and deconstruction of anthropocentrism and exploration of the relationship between humans and non-humans. The parameter of the Base is guarded by 'judges', well-trained and heavily equipped humans who examine residents returning from the wild and execute whoever is suspected of having been contaminated with the nonhuman. Lu Feng is the chief judge responsible for eliminating the nonhuman among humans. In contrast, Anzhe is a mushroom from the Abyss, the heartland of nonhuman monsters. The mushroom absorbs the flesh of a human resident in the Base, An Ze, a young man who died during his adventure in the wild. The mushroom shapeshifts into a human being named Anzhe, with similar sounds to the person's name in Mandarin. Herein I deliberately use Anzhe rather than An Zhe to signal the status quo of the mushroom as a non-human, a creature that is outside of the heteropatriarchal human laws, and hence without genders or the distinction between the family name and the given name. Anzhe then ventures into the human base to retrieve their spore, which was collected by Lu Feng during his scientific expedition into the abyss.

Lu Feng acts as the guardian of the order in the human base and is expected to defend the Base from any contaminated human and non-human creature's entrance. However, when they first meet at the entrance of the human base, Lu lets Anzhe in. This is the first time – Lufeng embraced the disorder as the guardian of the order. Lu Feng admits Anzhe into the Base and saves him on several occasions. Fully aware of Anzhe's real identity, Lu Feng nonetheless rescues Anzhe's life because he seems different.

Before encountering Anzhe, the whole Base led by Lu Feng is defending the order and rules of the humans. 'On the grew wall (of the Base) where a little taller than an adult, eight words and a period were printed in red paint: "Human interests are above all matters"' (Chapter 19). After the first meeting at the entrance of the Base, the story narrates how Anzhe and Lu Feng coincidentally work together to reveal the reasons why an increasing number of human beings were infected in the Base. It is through the series of adventures and encounters between Lu Feng and Anzhe that Lu Feng as the order guardian is 'disordered'. Lu Feng is fully aware of the fact that Anzhe is a non-human since his first encounter with Anzhe, but he does not enact his ruthless role as a rule enforcer. Lu Feng is observing Anzhe during the time they spend together, and at the same time, his previous stance for serving the human order, i.e. eliminating all the mutants, is beginning to waver.

Lu Feng's love for Anzhe and his increasing attachment for Anzhe, in particular after he has saved Anzhe several times, suggest his active acceptance of the disorder. Two months after Anzhe's arrival in the Base, mutant arthropods collectively invade the Base, which leads to the fall of the outer city. Only part of the survivors successfully moves to the main city, including Anzhe. After this invasion, most of the researchers and staff in the Base still believe that:

> 'It is unfortunate that the outer city of the base has fallen completely. But we also ended up eliminating the possibility of further leakage of human genes and left no chance for the monsters to flourish, which is also a victory,' said the researcher. He continued, 'What I want to tell you all is that there is no need to worry about the safety of the main city at the moment. The main city is the crystallisation of human technology at its peak, and its level of security is destined to prevent it from being invaded by outside monsters'.

(Chapter 27)

However, life in the main city with Anzhe further makes Lu Feng soften his preceding firm attitudes concerning defending human beings via eliminating all mutant creatures. The previous uncompromising, flinty and unyielding chief judge, who does not have any friends and only cares for the work of purging the mutant humans and non-humans from the Base, is changed by the mushroom Anzhe since Lu Feng more and more cares about Anzhe.

Now I employ agential realism[18] developed by Karen Barad to further unpack how the queer/wild love is generated in material-discursive practices. Herein I am not only considering the epistemology of love and desire, but perhaps more importantly, the ontology of desire embodied and embedded in the relationship between the human judge and the mushroom. The queer love is materialized in the spatial and temporal experiences between Lu and An. The agential realism does not merely signal the entanglement of matters and meanings. Materiality, as suggested by Barad,[19] is not a static entity, but is dynamically and constantly produced in practices. Agential realism invites us to reconsider the dynamic between the active and passive, and the material and the discursive, which is beyond the normative binarism in anthropocentric and heteronormative societies.

> On an agential realist account, discursive practices are not human-based activities but rather specific material (re) configuring of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted. And the matter is not a fixed essence; rather, the matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of the agency. And performativity is not understood as iterative citationality (Butler) but rather iterative intra-activity.[20]

Matter, therefore, is not immutable or passive. It is the process of producing the effects of support, location, referent, fixity and surface that we name ‘matter’. In this sense, Lu Feng’s desire or love for Anzhe is not merely formed in his increasing curiosity about and attention to the mushroom, but also his constant approach to Anzhe and active interactions with Anzhe in a series of adventures in and outside the Base. The material-discursive practices are dynamically constituted by both meanings and materialities. In the generation of queer and wild love between the human Lu Feng and the non-human Anzhe, matters and meanings are mutually entailed and articulated. In Chapter 67, when Lu first kisses Anzhe in a small, abandoned city outside of the Base, Anzhe kisses Lu Feng back in anger and bites Lu Feng’s lip intentionally. Lu Feng’s blood from the lip flows into Anzhe’s body, and then Anzhe acquires pieces of Lu’s memory. This significant plot vividly presents the mutual constitution of the material-discursive continuum. The generation of queer desires between Lu Feng and Anzhe during their intimate interactions is simultaneously performative. However, the performativity is not the version of Judith Butler’s iterative citationality in her linguistic paradigm. Butler suggests that ‘To return to matter requires that we return to matter as a *sign* [sic] which in its redoublings and contradictions enacts an inchoate drama of sexual difference.’[21] Queer love as performatively generated is not privileging either sign or matter, culture or nature. Rather, it is dynamically and relationally enacted in material-discursive practices. Barad’s re-framing of the performativity emphasizes that ‘(t)he move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices / doings / actions’.[22] The realization of queer love and desires, in this sense, is an ongoing ‘becoming’ enacted in the material-discursive practices. The material-discursive performativity, thus, signals

> A rethinking of the notions of discursive practices and material phenomena and the relationship between them. On an agential realist account, discursive practices are

> not human-based activities but rather specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted.[23]

In the final paragraph of Chapter 61, the author comments, 'The judge believes a nonhuman species, and the nonhuman believes a human judge. It is even impossible to say which is more ridiculous – for whatever reason. Perhaps the day they met is the beginning of the most absurd story in the world.' The queer love between the two protagonists emanates the disorder, and the intensity of love drives Lu to desire the disorder eventually. Lu Feng's humanist position, i.e. human interests are above all things, has been gradually replaced by the queer/wild love with the mushroom. On the one hand, he finds that the mutant creature cannot be eliminated as the mutation situation around the globe is getting worse and worse. On the other hand, the queer love for the wild drives Lu to rethink the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, and between culture and nature. The affirmation of his love for Anzhe also affirms his abandonment of the previous elimination approach while moving for the coexistence approach, namely, embracing the disordering wild just as his embracing of the mushroom Anzhe.

When Lu Feng finally realizes his love for the mushroom, the human(ist) world is, at the same time, on the edge of distinction as infection and mutation become more transmittable and out-of-control:

> (In the phone call to Lu, Dr Ji, the senior researcher of the Base, stated:) Humans used to get infected only when they were seriously injured, then they got infected even with a minor injury, then they got infected whenever they touched the mutant creature, and then they finally got infected without touching them, and I thought it was the worst scenario, but what happened? The quantum-level microstructure of the world is in chaos, and it's clearly a gradual process of deterioration. The world is getting more and more chaotic.
>
> (Chapter 66)

The exponential pace of mutation in the post-apocalyptic world makes human beings realize that their scientific system is not even worth mentioning. Then the queer posthumanist protagonist Anzhe offers their solution for human's co-existence with the wild: becoming the queer/wild.

Anzhe, queer/wild subject, driving the whole world to go wild

Before the predominance of the elimination approach, there existed another school at the base: the integration school. Dr Ji, the leading researcher in the base, talks to Anzhe with sorrow: 'There were many scientists who believed that given that other creatures could gain larger bodies and greater strength through mutation, and the ability to adapt to the deteriorative environment by infecting and mutating each other, human beings could also acquire these benefits' (Chapter 53). However, when most of the mutant humans in the Base become irrational and bloodthirsty, the integration school is expelled from the Base. The elimination school then dominates the Base, and 'human interests are above all' functions as the credo throughout the whole of humanity's life in the Base.

Lu Feng's mother Madam Lu is in charge of the reproduction of human beings in the Base. As to increase the population of the Base, qualified procreative women are constantly and collectively undertaking the reproductive roles after in vitro fertilization. As the administrator of this work, Madam Lu gets tired of such endless and suffering reproductive burdens. In Chapter 49, Madam Lu speaks to Anzhe about her long-time confusion and tiredness as regards human being's insistence on preserving the pure human genes from being contaminated by mutant creatures:

> I'm just often confused on one point … we resist those mutant 'monsters', and we reject the contamination of human genes by foreign (mutant) genes, in order to preserve our unique will as human beings and avoid being ruled by bestiality. But in order to achieve this, what we have done is all against the principles of humanity. And the collective that we have formed in the Base – acquiring more resources, growing itself, reproducing the offspring – can only reflect the nature of the beast. Humans actually have nothing different from the monsters outside. Only because of the flexibility of the brain, we give our own behaviours all kinds of excuses, which is de facto self-deception. Humans are just one of all ordinary animals, which are born like all life and are about to wither away like all life.
>
> (Chapter 49)

In Madam Lu's eyes, there is a dim and dead look, and then she adds that 'Human civilisation is as worthless as its technology'. Madam Lu in the story actively embraces the disorder and the mutation, and she then becomes a giant queen bee. She believes that 'in the face of the disaster, all work is futile and just proves the insignificance and powerlessness of human beings. I simply want to feel the things I never get to feel in the last peaceful times' (Chapter 50). Madam Lu's choice offers an alternative choice to the human beings to live in the post-apocalyptic world that is in complete chaos, namely, being incorporated into the chaos and being part of the disorder. Nevertheless, this is not the (only) alternative the author of *Xiaomogu* intends to present to her readers. When Madam Lu is stung by a wild bee incidentally and contaminated accordingly, she has been transformed into the queen bee. However, her previous lived experiences and memories as a woman in the human world are erased because of the mutation, and the instincts of the queen bee dominate her behaviours. As a matter of fact, Madam Lu's choice and transformation are not the authentic meaning of 'fusion' embraced by the integration school and offered by the author. The body and desires of the (post-)human-mushroom An Zhe function as the solution in the story to deliver the real essence of fusion.

In debt to Jack Halberstam conceptualization of 'queer/wild', I consider the protagonist Anzhe as a queer/wild, which functions as a posthumanist epistemology that offers alternative formulations that resist the orderly impulses of the anthropocentric modernity and that present the great momentum of queerness. Wildness 'spins narratives of vegetal growth, viral multiplication, dynamic systems of nonhuman exchange', and is 'the absence of order, the entropic force of a chaos that constantly spins away from biopolitical attempts to manage life and bodies and desires'.[24] I interpret Anzhe as a queer/wild subject and examine how the acceptance of Anzhe among the human beings infers the refusal to submit to the modernist social regulations and the desire for a disordering future, of wildness and of rumpus. First and notably, Anzhe as a little mushroom *per se* is a queer/wild subject. Anna Tsing's work *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* illuminates how mushrooms function as a symbol of interspecies interdependencies.[25] The mushroom sprouts in landscapes that have been considerably changed and/or damaged by humans and the very ecology are shaped by the human and non-human interface. Tsing uncovers the open-ended and mosaic assemblages of the entangled ways of life of the mushroom, which shows the 'possibilities of co-existence within environmental disturbance'.[26] Anzhe originally lives in the Abyss, the heartland of the wild, which is also the centre of the disorder, the place that experienced the worst damage from the catastrophe. The mushroom Anzhe grows up in the disturbance and disorder. Moreover, Anzhe's body, a fluid, transformable mushroom, can grow hyphae and transform into a mass of hyphae to pass through narrow channels, fit into different spaces, and overgrow with other creatures. In Chapter 34, Anzhe uses their plastic body to explore the ventilation pipes in the Base which they believe may be the cause of the mutation: 'Anzhe moved forward, their hyphae are like tentacles against the wall of the pipe, flowing gently forward.' This scene vividly depicts how Anzhe fits themselves with

different environments and more importantly, co-habitation. At the beginning of *Xiaomogu*, Anzhe has incorporated the blood and flesh of the human An Ze and, at the same time, inherits An Ze's memories and physical appearance, although with slight differences compared to the original looks of An Ze. Anzhe, thus, is a hybrid of the mushroom in the abyss and the human poet An Ze. I consider Anzhe at this stage to be a posthuman subject precisely because of this dynamic fusion. The fusion achieves the integrity between human An Ze and the mushroom.

Second and perhaps more importantly, the end of this story reveals how Anzhe functions as a queer posthuman, who invites the whole world to go wild with them. The author explains the apocalyptic via a romantic as well as queer reading of the string theory.[27] As the author of *Xiaomogu* writes, human civilization is just an occasional piece of melody played by the strings of the universe. When it is time to change the tune, the previous melody is doomed to disappear. At the end of the story, the protagonists Anzhe and Lu Feng discover that the truth of the universe is not harmony or stability, but chaos and disorder. They realize that it is not just the genetic sequences of organisms that contaminate each other. It turns out that everything is contaminating each other. The story reveals the world, the universe *per se* is a wild, a space full of disorder. Here comes the most intriguing point: what is unique about Anzhe is that they are endowed with a fixed frequency, which can prevent the humanity as well as other creatures from mutant monsters' 'contamination' outside the Base. Out of compassion for the struggling human species, Anzhe walks into a particle accelerator so that their unique frequency can be broadcasted to stabilize the chaotic vibration of the universe. Although Anzhe sacrifices themselves, Anzhe's spore that Lu keeps in the laboratory grows into a new Anzhe. The newborn Anzhe and Lu live happily ever after in the post-post-apocalyptic world.

However, it does not do justice for *Xiaomogu* if we jump to the conclusion that the story ends with a normative ending because the story seemingly employs the stable frequency of the mushroom Anzhe to terminate the chaos, which appears to reproduce another orderly humanist world. On the contrary, the broadcast of Anzhe's frequency *de facto* is to contaminate all the human beings and the non-humans on the earth. Then all the species on the globe gain the capacity to prevent further mutation from contamination by other contaminated creatures. Such immunity is granted from accepting contamination from Anzhe, i.e. fusion with Anzhe. All creatures on the earth are fused with Anzhe, the wild non-human or post-human. All creatures now go wild. *Xiaomogu* has offered a disordering queer future.

Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein interpret the posthuman as synonymous with the posthumous, as a future time and space after humans, which is 'not merely a speculative imagination', 'but an actual experience of ending'.[28] Their conceptualization of posthumanism invites acceptance of the possibility of 'human' extinction and a 'human-free' future world, which is precisely what has been illustrated in *Xiaomogu*. It is questionable to regard the human beings who have adopted and integrated the frequency of Anzhe as the humanist 'human'. Differently, they are now qualified as the posthuman. *Xiaomogu* offers precisely what has been elaborated in Anna Tsing: the art of symbiotics. Mushrooms thrive in the blasted landscapes, and so do the post-humans who are fused with the mushroom's frequency. Therefore, *Xiaomogu* presents its queer/wild world-making power via its imagination of the post-humanist earth where the human and the nonhuman form the symbiotic relationships.

Danmei, Xiaomogu and heterogenous imaginations of queer/wild futures

Xiaomogu invites its readers to reflexively ponder the heteronormativity in anthropocentrism, the human exceptionalism, and rethink the human as inseparable from the nonhuman, as part of the queer/wild. In the material-discursive practices, the

generation of queer/wild love and the desires between Anzhe and Lu Feng shows the rejection of the modernist ideologies and the humanist positions in the Anthropocene, and the embrace of the disorder. The presentation of the post-human queer/wild subject Anze functions to reveal the world's essence as disorder and the art of symbiotics. The inseparability between Anzhe and human beings, and human being's fusion with Anzhe, proclaims the posthumanist queer/wild future: loving and desiring Anzhe as queering/querying the anthropocentric heteronormativity, fusing with Anzhe as integrating into the wild. Going wild with Anzhe, with the posthuman queer mushroom, is the alternative future offered by *Xiaomogu*.

As Rosi Braidotti suggested, 'Posthuman subjectivity starts with the acknowledgement that what defines us as an autonomous capacity is not rationality, nor our cerebral faculty alone, but rather the autonomy of affect as a virtual force that gets actualised through relational bonds.'[29] The love relationship between Anzhe and the human judge Lu Feng shows the affective embrace of the disorder as well as of the queer/wild. Moreover, Braidotti also reminded us that posthuman subjects are relational beings who possess the capacity to affect and be affected. Fusion with Anzhe means being affected by Anzhe, which creates the symbiotic relationship between the human and the non-human. And the frequency of the posthuman Anzhe is at the same time diffusing among the (post-)human beings and across the globe. Xiaomogu as a queer sci-fi romance embodies the significant and radical queer explorations and explanations embedded in the heterogenous and reflexive Chinese *danmei* cultural ecology which contains complex and multiple interrogations of the heteronormative anthropocentric world and the alternative queer/wild future.

Notes

1 Yishisizhou, *Xiaomogu* (The Little Mushroom), Jinjiang Literature City, https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=4105840. Five extra chapters were added as the specials between February and June 2020, which is a common practice for *danmei* as well as other internet genre literature writers to add specials after finishing their serialization.

2 See Mingwei Song and Theodore Huters, eds., *The Reincarnated Giant: An Anthology of Twenty-First-Century Chinese Science Fiction*, Weatherhead Books on Asia (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Mingwei Song, 'A Topology of Hope: Utopia, Dystopia, and Heterotopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction', *AUC PHILOLOGICA* 2021, no. 3 (15 February 2022): 107–33.

3 For example, the A/B/O genre explore by Liang Ge in 'Problematizing Heteronormativity', *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 7, no. 2 (2021): 241–54; and the father-son incest gender discussed by Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, 'Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of Power in Chinese BL Fiction', *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 4, no. 1 (2013): 30–43.

4 Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, Perverse Modernities (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

5 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

6 Slash fiction is a genre of fanfiction that features male-male romantic and/or sexual relationships, while *yaoi*, also known as boys' love in Japan, depicts male-male romance and/or erotica and is primarily in the form of original comics. For more *yaoi* studies, see Mark McLelland et al., eds., *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); and for slash, see Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017).

7 Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, 'The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name: The Fate of Chinese Danmei Communities in the 2014 Anti-Porn Campaign', in *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Mark McLelland (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 163–83; Jin Feng, '"Addicted to Beauty": Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese "Danmei" Fiction at Jinjiang', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 1–41.

8 Japanese *yaoi* culture has also travelled and gained its currency beyond East Asia, including in Euro-American societies, see Andrea Wood, 'Boys' Love Anime and Queer Desires in Convergence Culture: Transnational Fandom, Censorship and Resistance', *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 4, no. 1 (June 2013): 44–63; and Ágnes Zsila et al., 'Loving the Love of Boys: Motives for Consuming Yaoi Media', *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 6 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0198895.

9 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992); Mark McLelland, 'Why Are Japanese Girls' Comics Full of Boys Bonking', *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media*, no. 1 (2001): 9; Chunyu Zhang, 'Loving Boys Twice as Much: Chinese Women's Paradoxical Fandom of "Boys' Love" Fiction', *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 3 (2016): 249–67.

10 Joanna Russ, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts: Feminist Essays*, The Crossing Press Feminist Series (Trumansburg, N.Y: Crossing Press, 1985).

11 Lucy Neville, *Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

12 Akiko Mizoguchi, *R'eading and Living Yaoi: Male-Male Romance Fantast Narratives as Women's Subculture in Japan"* (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2008).

13 Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li, 'A Queer "Socialist Brotherhood": The *Guardian* Web Series, Boys' Love Fandom, and the Chinese State', *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 4 (18 May 2020): 479–95; Tingting Hu and Cathy Yue Wang, 'Who Is the Counterpublic? Bromance-as-Masquerade in Chinese Online Drama – *S.C.I. Mystery ', Television & New Media* 22, no. 6 (2021): 671–86; Liang Ge, 'Dual Ambivalence: *The Untamed* Girls as a Counterpublic', *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 5 (2022): 1021–33.

14 Ge, 'Problematizing Heteronormativity', 243.

15 Yanyan Zhou, Bryant Paul, and Ryland Sherman, 'Still a Hetero-Gendered World: A Content Analysis of Gender Stereotypes and Romantic Ideals in Chinese Boy Love Stories', *Sex Roles* 78, no. 1–2 (2018): 107–18.

16 All translations from Chinese in this chapter are mine.

17 Simone McCarthy and Cheng Cheng, 'The world changed overnight: Zero-Covid overhaul brings joy and fears in China', CNN, 9 December 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/08/china/china-zero-covid-relaxation-reaction-intl-hnk/index.html (accessed 28 February 2023).

18 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*; Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (March 2003): 801–31.

19 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 151.

20 Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', 828.

21 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge Classics (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 49.

22 Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', 802.

23 Ibid., 828.

24 Halberstam, *Wild Things,* 7.

25 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

26 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* 4.

27 String theory is a theoretical framework that gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s in physics that aims to describe the fundamental building blocks of the universe and the forces that govern them. This single framework suggests that at the most fundamental level, particles are not point-like entities, but rather tiny, vibrating strings. These strings can be open or closed loops and have different modes of vibration, which give rise to the various properties and characteristics of particles. See Elias Kiritsis, *String Theory in a Nutshell*, Second edition, In a Nutshell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

28 Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook, eds., *Posthumous Life: Theorizing beyond the Posthuman*, Critical Life Studies (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), xii.

29 Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 45.

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Part IV

In Queer Memory

Chapter 12

Queer Singapore Chinese Theatre: Staging Homosexuality, AIDS and Familial Acceptance

How Wee Ng

Figure 12.1 The 15th iteration of the Pink Dot rally in Singapore on 24 June 2023, courtesy of Pink Dot SG (Sin Yang).

In 2022, responding to the Singapore government's plan to repeal Section 377A in the Penal Code, a law which criminalizes sex between men, twenty-two LGBTQ groups in Singapore issued a signed community statement, describing the action as the 'first step on a long road towards full equality':

> To the past victims of Section 377A and its cascading effects, including those who have faced threats of police entrapment, raids and criminal charges, repeal will never be able to fully right the historic wrongs that you faced. To others whom we have lost along the way, we have not forgotten the heavy toll that this law has exacted on you and your loved ones.[1]

Introduced in 1937 when Singapore was still under British colonial rule, the law was finally scraped in 2023. However, for many years, it not only contributed to fear among the queer community,[2] but also fanned homophobia in society and led to the prosecution of many gay individuals.[3] Indeed, even if 'repeal would enable the beginning of a process of healing',[4] recent Singapore queer plays staged at the time of writing following repeal still depict the post-trauma and the fear of the queer community caused by state-sponsored homophobia and prosecution from the past.[5] At the heart of the repeal is a queer individual's personhood, dignity, wellbeing, not least, the very value of their life in their family, and more widely, in a heteronormative society. Twenty years ago, these issues found engagement in three Singapore Chinese plays, namely, *Another Tribe* (异族 1992), *Borrowed Time* (春光暫借 1999) and *The Next Generations* (后代 1992), which variously examine homosexuality, disease, death and dying, not least, the familial acceptance of queer subjects. Most interestingly, these plays were created in the 1990s – a particularly fascinating period of social contradictions when the state was vested in the discipline of queer bodies and women's sexuality alike, while this was being contested by the arts, and in particular, theatre. The Singapore government has long considered homosexuality as 'a threat and aberration [...] because same-gender unions usually do not result in procreation', and 'subvert the cause of genetic engineering'.[6] In the name of sustaining economic growth, the 'Great Marriage Debate' emerged in 1983 and the state begrudged graduate Chinese women for not marrying and reproducing to address racial and class imbalance.[7] These paternalistic concerns are encapsulated in promoting the heteronormative family as the 'basic unit of society' – one of five tenets in the government's *White Paper on Shared Values* in 1991 – conceived as a national ideology to curb the 'worrying trend' of young people following 'Western values', primarily 'individualism' which threatens 'social cohesion and national competitiveness'.[8]

Lending legitimacy to this reactionary discourse of Occidentalism and internalized-Orientalism was a highly hostile and homophobic local news media, of which all papers are state-associated. National dailies often carried derogatory and dehumanizing reports on homosexuality. Routine police entrapment of gays between 1989 and 1994 was widely reported in the news.[9] Even though it was plainclothes policemen who availed themselves sexually to gays in cruising grounds, news reports portrayed the latter as instigators, 'absolving the police of the ethical issue of entrapment'.[10] Exacerbating homophobia was the ongoing global AIDS crisis, handing the media a freehand to frequently associate this marginalized group with promiscuity, social deviance and disease.[11]

Despite the socially conservative and sexually repressive climate, the performing arts then offered an alternative voice for sexual minorities in Singapore. Ironically, this was made possible by the state policy on developing a global city for the arts since the early 1990s when Singapore theatre would play an important role in countering the hegemonic discourse on queer representation. When the internet had yet become ubiquitous in Singapore, audience engagement with LGBTQ audio-visual content was often limited to local television and cinema, much of which is homophobic and discriminatory. In personal communication, Jackie Liu, who starred in *Another Tribe,* recalls being upset by the proliferation of offensive stereotypes in popular culture then, including Hong Kong and Taiwanese cinema,[12] which enjoyed a large Chinese-speaking following in Singapore: 'Gays were either sissies, sickly AIDS victims, or psychopaths in films. The same could also be seen in Singapore Chinese television serials throughout the 1980s and 1990s.' However, coinciding with this period was the easing of the film censorship rating system in 1991, which facilitated the local circulation and consumption of transnational queer popular culture, including Western films depicting queers in a sympathetic light. Some of these included *Philadelphia* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1993)*, The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (dir. Stephen Elliot, 1994)*, The Birdcage* (dir. Mike Nichols, 1996) and *My Own Private Idaho* (dir. Gus Van Sant, 1997), all which enjoyed commercial release and

screening in Singapore cinemas. Audiences also had access to Chinese queer films such as *The Wedding Banquet* (dir. Ang Lee, 1993),[13] *Farewell My Concubine* (dir. Chen Kaige, 1993), *East Palace, West Palace* (dir. Zhang Yuan, 1996), *Happy Together* (dir. Wong Kar Wai, 1997) and *Bishonen* (dir. Yonfan, 1998). These films would form some of the sexually liberating queer repertoire which all my informants involved in the creation of the three plays recall viewing and drew inspiration from while contending with the state conservatism and homophobia in local media.

It is within this social milieu fraught with tensions arising from moral conservatism and cultural liberalization when *Another Tribe*, *Borrowed Time* and *The Next Generations* were conceived and staged. In analysing these plays, I demonstrate how queer Singapore Chinese theatre engaged with issues of homosexuality, homophobia and AIDS in the 1990s, and highlight the paradoxes in state cultural policy which, on the one hand, legitimized homophobia and, on the other, promoted the arts under a capitalist neoliberal framework, making it conducive for queer representation in theatre. In addition, the state's reactionary discourse against the 'decadence' of Western culture and essentialist mother tongue policy alongside the country's access to global queer culture enabled queer Chinese theatre to achieve the symbolism of decolonizing language in Singapore, which invites us to consider the local politics of Chinese cultural practice. In the wider fields of queer Chinese-language literature and visual culture, the chapter also contributes to the radical rethink of queer Chinese kinship in the analysis of *The Next Generation* through its representation of familial acceptance and genealogical continuity, not least in the context of the Singapore Pride event Pink Dot 2023 with its theme 'Celebrating All Families'. To enrich primary data, this chapter also includes interviews with Kok Heng Leun (henceforth Kok), Jackie Liu (henceforth Liu), Otto Fong (henceforth Fong) and Lim Soon Lan (henceforth Lim), all conducted in 2022.

Another Tribe *(1992)*

In 1992, Singapore Chinese theatre company Drama Box staged the queer play, *Another Tribe* – the first Mandarin play in Singapore to be given a 'Restricted' rating for its gay- and AIDS-related content. It was part of a double bill which included *Life's Elsewhere*, another Mandarin play on AIDS. This section will highlight the significance of *Another Tribe* in sympathetic queer representation alongside its critique of discrimination and homophobia towards AIDS victims and queers. Premiering on 21 October at the Guinness Theatre, Substation, *Another Tribe* was the maiden play of Otto Fong created through a playwriting programme,[14] and co-directed by Kok Heng Leun and Tang Tuan Choon. 'Occupying a place in the history of Singapore Chinese theatre',[15] the production 'represents homosexuality not as a medical abnormality, but as a social minority'.[16] Shortly after the state's *Shared Values* document was published, a theatre audience classification system was created, coinciding with the relaxation of film censorship in 1991,[17] which played to the advantage of *Another Tribe*. In a personal interview, Kok reveals that its adult rating generated much suspense and excitement, contributing significantly to marketing and publicity, while Liu recalls that it was performed to a full house and more chairs had to be added.

Figure 12.2 Laixing and Chaoyi in *Another Tribe* (1992), courtesy of Drama Box.

While English theatre groups had staged plays on homosexuality in the 1980s, *Another Tribe* is highly significant and 'ground-breaking' insofar as it represented the relationship between two men 'as a given, not as something morally wrong'.[18] Set in the 1990s, the story revolves around two central characters Chaoyi and Laixing in a love relationship in a homophobic society grappling with the fear of AIDS. Owing to family pressures and internalized homophobia triggered by their gay friend Bobby who made a failed suicide attempt after catching HIV, a fate which they fear would be their own, they eventually break up. Chaoyi eventually succumbs to a heterosexual marriage.

For audiences used to gay bashing in the media, the opening scene was refreshingly affirming. Two men, William and Bobby, enthuse about their unabashed love for beautiful men, including 'labouring bodies, slaves who built the pyramids, Shaolin monks, Olympic

athletes' and 'the statue of David' all which drive their 'hearts thumping madly'. More striking was the spectacle of half-naked actors in briefs showing affection to one another in the intimate setting of a black box theatre.

Notably, the two most significant queer local English plays in 1992 were Russell Heng's *Lest the Demons Get to Me* and Michael Chiang's *Private Parts*, both of which featured the struggles of transsexuals.[19] According to playwright Fong in a personal interview, the queer tenderness of *Another Tribe* had the political significance of self-representation without having to 'hide under the cover of transvestism':

> Before I wrote *Another Tribe*, I watched English queer plays, including local productions, but most had transgender persons or transvestites as a guise for homosexuality. While I do enjoy watching drag performances, I'm uncomfortable with performing drag myself. Why do I have to put on a woman's dress to fight injustice? With all due respect to transgender people and transvestites, why should transgenders and cross-dressing become a surrogate for gay representation? The dress can be thought of as the superhero costume, but I wouldn't look good in that. Why are we hiding behind another marginalised group for our own representation and rights?

While Fong acknowledged the importance of gay representation in Western and Chinese queer films, many of which he watched in Singapore, he opined that local Chinese theatre served a purpose a film like *The Wedding Banquet* or musical like *The Torch Song Trilogy* cannot fulfil. Even if the former uses Mandarin which he could relate to and the latter 'helped him find his voice', he believes that 'theatre is an effective and affordable way of embodying a local queer voice', especially when uplifting queer films set in a Southeast Asian context were unavailable in the 1990s. He asserts that local films with queer content such as *Forever Fever* (1998) by Singapore director Glenn Goei or Hong Kong director Yonfan's *Bugis Street* (1995) 'do not go far enough to address internalized homophobia'. However, he contends that while theatre audiences tend to be economically privileged and well-educated, having local queer theatre is better than 'zero representation' at all as it would raise social awareness towards the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community.

As an ambitious play, *Another Tribe* not only deals with homophobia, but also draws from rather diverse cultural references, including the well-known historical figure of Justice Bao from the Song Dynasty, who symbolizes law enforcement against queers in the story. It also features a Taoist priest whom Chaoyi's mother hires to exorcise the 'evil sin' (niè 孽) of homosexuality in her son. Chaoyi and Laixing share their fantasies about the homoeroticism between American comic superheroes Batman and Robin; they also roleplay the lieutenant and his wife in a suicide pact in Japanese queer closeted author Yukio Mishima's *Patriotism.* A mysterious cloaked figure who appears intermittently, sometimes observing the action taking place on stage, serves as a Brechtian device symbolizing the spectre of surveillance, disease and mortality. This figure makes an appearance when Bobby is planning to jump off the building which highlights discrimination and impending death. Interspersed throughout the play are surreal sequences of a basketball game played by Chaoyi, Laixing, William and Bobby with players disappearing randomly; this allegorized the AIDS crisis which took the lives of many.

Other than the AIDS panic, the play also featured the mental health of gay people who struggled with widespread homophobia and discrimination, which contributed to the characters expressing feelings of loneliness, depression, suicide, low self-esteem and internalized homophobia. Especially poignant is when Bobby bemoans his loneliness, he also decries the injustice he has been suffering before attempting to jump:

> I am a law-abiding citizen – I flush the toilet after use, and I don't even dare to cross the yellow line when I'm at the MRT (subway) station! […] Who am I doing this for? (He points at the crowd standing below.) For them? A shameless straight couple can

> openly kiss on the train from Orchard to Bishan, but when we secretly go to a toilet, the police arrest us![20]

The allusion to the harsh penalty of S$150 (US$113) for not flushing a public toilet after use is, more broadly, an indictment of enforced conformity and zero tolerance for queers in a draconian society. The revelation about his HIV-positive condition which may develop into full-blown AIDS – the equivalent of a death sentence – completely nullifies his already low sense of self-worth. Suicide appears to be the only option left for him to retain control of his life/death in a homophobic and repressive society. The police attempt to dissuade him to give up his suicide attempt, which was illegal in Singapore until 2019. In response, he condemns the entrapment and prosecution of queers:

> When I go to East Coast, you also arrest me, and when I turn up at Hong Lim Park, you give me no peace! Now I want to kill myself, you still want to control me?[21]

Partly as a means of curbing HIV infections among the population, the police carried out regular crackdowns on cruising grounds,[22] including those mentioned by Bobby. His humiliation is endemic of the harassment of gays by the police who ran interrogations, recorded personal details and conducted minor entrapment exercises in public toilets during the 1990s.[23] The public malice, fear and loathing towards the queer community are most evident when a passer-by taunts Bobby to jump because of his homosexuality and AIDS. Although his suicide attempt is eventually foiled by the police, Laixing criticizes Chaoyi for not trying to stop Bobby from killing himself. Especially telling is the internalized homophobia in Chaoyi's response:

> Bobby told everyone he's gay. If I went up there to help him, that's good as telling the whole world I'm gay too![24]

Another Tribe ends on a poignant note with the mysterious figure reappearing to photograph himself with Chaoyi, suggesting that the latter's mortality is in question. Additionally, this implies apathy and complicity arising from an internalized homophobe's self-preservation attempt could result in a wider death, both symbolic and physical, of other queers who continue to suffer from discrimination, alongside mental health struggles such as depression and low self-esteem. While the play is a rather pessimistic portrayal of queer love and life, it was zeitgeist of the 1990s, yet trailblazing for affirming male beauty without any shame or guilt and critiquing police entrapment and homophobia.

Borrowed Time *(1999)*

Also featuring the taboo topics of homosexuality and AIDS, *Borrowed Time* was staged by Drama Box from 2 to 19 September 1999. This section will continue to highlight how a more relaxed cultural environment and the state's divide-and-rule multicultural and language policy have ironically enabled the play alongside *Another Tribe* to achieve the queering and decolonizing of Chinese language in Singapore. Presented as a portmanteau alongside the adaptation of *Kitchen* (1988) by Banana Yoshimoto under the overall title of *Timeless Kitchen*, *Borrowed Time* is a theatrical rendition of queer American author Paul Monette's eponymous memoir on how he cared for his partner Roger while both struggled with AIDS till the latter's very last days. The play is adapted by Chua Shen Zi and Lawrence Ong and directed by Jackie Liu. Unfortunately, no text or video recording of the play is available as these were destroyed by rain damage caused by a broken roof in the theatre company. Nevertheless, a discussion of *Borrowed Time* based on what might be garnered from media coverage, reviews, contemporary interviews and academic literature, this section illustrates the criticality of queer theatre as a safe space for social critique while

highlighting the notion of how 'the personal is the political' matters, not least the politics of Chinese cultural practice in queer Singapore representation.

While Singapore newspaper coverage of homosexuality in real life during the 1990s was largely inflammatory and discriminatory, journalism on the arts in the very same state-owned papers, including queer plays, was more tolerant, if not, affirming. I observe that on part of the authorities, there appears to be a tacit understanding that tolerated not only positive queer representation in the arts, but also news commentary and publicity of related performances – this is in line with the state project on building a global city for the arts. Local mainstream news media has often played a pivotal role in promoting the arts; this is evident in the generally positive coverage of *Another Tribe* and *Borrowed Time*, in both Chinese and English language papers. Even more noteworthy was how *Another Tribe*, *Life's Elsewhere* and *The Next Generations* were all created in the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH)'s Playwriting Studio – a Chinese-language programme aimed at nurturing new playwrights, organized by pioneering theatre group Theatre Practice and sponsored by SPH – the same state-associated media company which carried national dailies with homophobic headlines. Nonetheless, previews of *Borrowed Time* by its journalists helped generate publicity[25] and while a review mentioned the ineffective adaptation due to translation, it lauded the 'tender, if subdued, performances' of the cast.[26]

Based on a personal interview, director Jackie Liu recalls how his participation in both *Another Tribe and Borrowed Time* was personally liberating, as if 'tasting forbidden fruit' – 'the more we were prohibited [in real life], the more I wanted to do it'. This highlighted how the personal was closely intertwined with the political as he was 'pushing boundaries':

> We do have a gay community, but they were ignored, repressed, and treated as if they do not exist. Just because gays are not the majority in society, their humanity should not be denied.

When I asked why Liu had chosen to do theatre instead of writing letters to the press to discuss homosexuality, he replies, 'There were more possibilities in theatre. We had the space to explore and experiment under the disclaimer of fictionality.' Inherent in the notion of *space* here is not only the freedom, albeit limited, to represent homosexuality in the arts, but also the materiality of theatre venues which enables unrelated people to congregate and experience the live presence of queer performance.[27] *Another Tribe* was staged at the Substation Guinness Theatre while *Borrowed Time* was presented at the studio theatre of Drama Box. Both are smaller-scaled spaces, optimized for staging fringe and experimental works, often dealing with challenging themes. Compared to huge proscenium theatres, Liu believes that the smallness of studio theatres offered a 'sense of intimacy, safety and inclusiveness for the audience, and allowed actors to see the facial expressions of audiences and feel their emotions'. Director of *Another Tribe* Kok also describes the parallel seating arrangement of the production as helping to create an atmosphere of 'togetherness':

> For Chinese-speaking audiences, the excitement and tensions were palpable – they could see one another face-to-face up close. There was an energy in the theatre, pushing towards something, like change was in the air.

Similarly, Liu describes the social climate atmosphere as becoming 'increasingly open even though it was still conservative, boundaries were being challenged'. Although the fundamental change for gays would only arrive twenty years later through decriminalization, that a member of the audience might feel they belong to a larger community, perhaps queer, offers the comforting thought of safety and solidarity in numbers. However, compared to television and cinema, it is also the nature of the medium with smaller audiences that makes theatre less threatening to the status quo, thereby

enabling its function as a 'critical space' for social critique notwithstanding, especially in a society where civil discourse is highly regulated.[28]

Other than space, the politics of language is also at stake for Chinese queer theatre. Despite their positive depiction of homosexuality, the authorities apparently approved the staging of *Another Tribe* and *Borrowed Time.* Attributing this tolerance to the language medium – Mandarin, William Peterson suggests that compared to English theatre which enjoyed a larger audience outreach, the authorities might have perceived Mandarin to be less threatening.[29] This assumption meant that Chinese theatre was understood to possess limited social impact that could supposedly change the mindsets of audiences in favour of homosexuality. Ironically, it was Singapore Chinese-language theatre which commanded far larger audiences from the 1950s to 1970s when it played a crucial role in political activism which championed anticolonialism, student and worker movements.[30] However, stirred by Cold War anxieties driven by the alleged spread of communism by Chinese cultural activities in Singapore, Chinese theatre suffered a state clampdown under Operation Coldstore in 1976 from which it never fully recovered,[31] with English theatre becoming the mainstay.[32]

Defanging the Chinese language of its power to mobilize large crowds for a social cause was depoliticization achieved through the bilingual education policy which saw the establishment of English as the main language of instruction alongside the teaching of mother tongues in schools by the 1980s. For the government, the mother tongues Chinese, Malay and Tamil serve the functions of keeping citizens 'rooted in their traditional values, cultures and languages',[33] which will 'enhance [their] identity and cultural values', ensure Singaporeans 'remain Asian, and not become over-Westernised and deculturalised',[34] and engender a sense of belonging to 'a rich and ancient culture'.[35] In other words, in postcolonial Singapore where a divide-and-rule multicultural policy is modelled after British colonialism[36] and English serves as 'privileged medium of access to Western science and technology'[37]; it is, however, not considered by the government to be 'a real medium of culture' but rather, 'a medium of westernisation and social pollution'.[38] Together with the *Shared Values*, Chinese language education and cultural activities, which have been officially ascribed with the function of instilling Asian values, constitute a national project on the inculcation of heteronormativity that supposedly protects society against homosexuality, a condition often linked to 'Western decadence'.[39] In other words, the state frequently articulated 'a national ideology of a traditional Asian society fighting to preserve its essence against undesirable Western influences',[40] including the dissemination of queer-affirmative ideas. This implies that any Singapore Chinese cultural practice, including Chinese theatre productions such as *Another Tribe, Borrowed Time* and *The Next Generations*, which critiques state-sponsored homophobia, goes beyond subverting the dominant discourse on heteronormativity to queer and decolonize language policy. Notably, the creators of *Another Tribe* and *Borrowed Time*, Liu, Kok and Fong were all schooled in the bilingual education system through the 1970s and 1980s. Sy Ren Quah describes them as 'the 1990s generation' who still speak Mandarin and/or various Chinese regional languages at home.[41] Within the wider environment of evolving language usage trends, an unprecedented and unique phenomenon in Singapore history emerged – the majority of the 1990s generation was bilingual in English in Chinese.[42] Indeed, against the state's hostile stance on Western culture, in contrast with their Chinese-educated predecessors, the bilingualism of the 1990s generation enabled them to access both queer English and Chinese literature, cinema and theatre with relative ease.[43] In the interview Liu tells me that the playwrights of *Borrowed Time* read the original English text by Monette as 'there was no Chinese translation available then', while Fong's references in *Another Tribe* to Western popular culture and Mishima's literature all attest to how queer Singapore Chinese theatre practitioners in the 1990s were able to position themselves comfortably in relation

to global queer culture, including drawing inspiration from 'undesirable Western influences'.

More importantly, the use of Chinese in Fong's *Another Tribe* goes beyond queering and decolonizing language policy and critiquing heteronormativity is politically poignant. As a bilingual individual, Fong was educated at the Chinese High School during his formative years; this is a Singapore institution known for its leftist historical background and steeped in the teaching of Chinese language and culture. However, Fong shares that after returning from the United States with an engineering degree in 1989, he was initially hesitant about joining the SPH Playwriting Studio programme as he was 'lacking the confidence to write in Mandarin'. Under his mother's encouragement, he took up the endeavour. As the son of Fong Swee Suan, the co-founder of the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) and trade unionist Chen Poh Cheng, writing a Chinese play that critiqued dominant values hence constitutes a symbolic act that honours his parents' generation of Chinese-educated intellectuals who were silenced and persecuted for their political activism and beliefs.

The Next Generations *(1992)*

Directed by the late theatre doyen cum Theatre Practice artistic director Kuo Pao Kun, Lim Soon Lan's *The Next Generations* debuted first as a dramatized reading in October 1992 at the Substation Guinness Theatre before playing at Victoria Theatre in 1993. In 2010 it was restaged twice by Drama Box and was directed by Hong Kong director Tang Shu-wing, first at the Esplanade Studio Theatre in Singapore, and subsequently at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. Renowned for its meticulous portrayal of the characters and life journeys of women,[44] it is also noted for its skilful use of literary devices.[45] As a highly rich and layered text, the play articulates nostalgia for the Singapore rustic way of life under threat by rapid urbanization inasmuch it is about women who negotiate their choices and autonomy around patriarchal pressures. The play was and remains trailblazing for challenging patriarchal and patrilineal values and putting forth a model of queer kinship. In today's context when there is increased awareness and support towards LGBTQ rights, it takes on a contemporary significance across the wider Sinophone context.

The story is centred around a single-parent family. Widowed in her youth, the elderly Mother singlehandedly raises two daughters and a son. The elder sister Ah Zhen relinquishes a lifetime opportunity to marry someone whom she loves to care for Mother and her siblings. Owing to financial pressures at home albeit with some resentment, Ah Feng the younger sister is forced to start working and forgo university education in favour of her younger brother, Ah Hai – the only heir in the Lin family. Due to marital conflicts, Ah Zhen leaves her husband and takes her son with her. Central to the lives of all three women is their devotion towards the well-being and education of Ah Hai and their expectations for him to marry and carry on the family line.

Against the social backdrop of state fatherhood – 'the institutional basis on which governmental patriarchy [is] posited',[46] *The Next Generations* is a queer and feminist play which creates a progressive vision of a women-led family. While the lives and choices of the women are shaped by patriarchy, all the men, including the deceased father's eldest brother – Ah Hai's paternal uncle, Ah Hai, Ah Hai's partner River and their adopted son – do not physically appear throughout the entire play but are represented via the women's conversations. While the most senior patriarch in the family – the uncle – is afforded a voiceover on his letters addressed to the family at the beginning of every act, he does not have a physical body. Indeed, even though 'the men do influence the development of the play, they are absentees who have very little power'.[47] Inasmuch the sacrifices and choices all women in the story make are shaped by gender oppression and inequalities, they are negotiating and resisting the heteronormative and dual-parent family in their own ways. In a society where the state categorically dismisses any recognition and support of women-led

families of single mothers or illegitimate children,[48] the women characters proactively reinvent the Chinese family in their own terms. Mother becomes head of the household following the death of her spouse while Ah Zhen resists the pressure to marry and devotes herself to caring for her mother and her siblings. Despite the risk of discrimination by becoming a single parent, Ah Feng makes the brave decision to separate from her husband. Without 'a paternal signifier', this is a family which challenges the state's 'patriarchal authority vested in the traditional Asian family', after which 'its own hierarchies and values' are modelled.[49]

On the other hand, the women's travails are mitigated and united by a common desire for Ah Hai to marry a woman and produce offspring. Ironically, Ah Hai is gay, lives with his male partner and both are suffering from AIDS. In personal communication, Lim recalls the global fear towards AIDS in the 1990s, and how 'homosexuality was equivalent to AIDS, and AIDS was equivalent to death'. For a conservative society that sees AIDS and homosexuality as taboo, the play is ground-breaking for addressing these topics. Aware of Ah Hai's homosexuality and his love relationship with River, they keep this a secret from Mother who struggles to understand why her son remains single and lives away from her. While the sisters appreciate the frustration and disappointment of Mother who belongs to the generation devoted to caregiving and self-sacrifice towards the family, they are no less empathetic towards Ah Hai and River:

> Ah Zhen: He asked, 'If I was the sick one, would you avoid me?'
> Ah Feng (calms down): Are they in such a deep relationship?
> Ah Zhen: I've never seen Ah Hai crying like that. Always smiling and nothing seems to bother him. Today I saw him looking so tired with his head hanging down. This is the first time I saw wrinkles at the corner of his eyes. Our Little Brother is now thirty.
> […]
> Ah Feng: Sometimes I wonder if boys are born with privilege. Girls must struggle throughout their lives whereas boys hardly have any worries. The old Ah Hai and the present Ah Ji [Ah Feng's son] don't seem to be bothered by anything.
> Ah Zhen: Actually, Ah Hai has a more troubled life than us. That's why he said he's really like a one-legged myna: he doesn't lean to one side or another – he's just like the other mynas which can leap around but when he's tired, he's missing the other leg for resting … I don't know what he's saying.
> Ah Feng: A one-legged bird is always a queer creature.[50]

Figure 12.3 *The Next Generations* (2010) by Drama Box, presented as part of Huayi 2010, courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

When *The Next Generations* was restaged in 2010, Lim reiterated that her intention of writing the play was not so much about homosexuality itself, but rather, its symbolism for changing times. In other words, the queer Ah Hai is more a symbolism of the end of an era and a rural lifestyle.[51] Ah Hai's parents migrated from China and established their family in a *kampung* – a Singapore-style village – perceivably marked by warm, cohesive community ties as opposed to the flats in high-rises seen as alienating. However, the Lins are also one of the last generations to live in *kampungs* before the state relocated them to public housing estates. As a gay person and the only son who neither enters heterosexual marriage nor produces offspring of his own blood, Ah Hai has terminated his genealogy in a traditional sense. Lim reserves the right to interpret his queerness and mortality as signifying the end of a community's way of life, but a queer reading can be made of the mass relocation of rural families to high-rise government housing. This national project is endemic of the wider biopolitics of social engineering, which aims at supporting and reproducing heteronormative families with kids – a configuration requiring women to 'continuously reproduce a middle-class way of life and society, mirroring the ruling elite's images of that class'.[52]

The pivotal detail that made *The Next Generations* a progressive model of queer kinship came in the form of a suggestion by Kuo who facilitated the SPH Playwriting Studio workshops. After the dramatized reading of *The Next Generations* in 1992, Lim made an addition which she later discusses in a recent publication:

> During the 1990s gay rights activism was bustling and peaking in a way that was comparable to the American black rights movement in the 1960s; it eventually became the mainstream in political struggles. When I first started writing the play, I only wanted to use homosexuality to allegorise the termination of a family line. However, Mr Kuo thought that this was too limiting, and he was dissatisfied with reducing homosexuality to an abstract symbol. He opines that the gay [son] goes

> beyond identifying and connecting with blood-related kin to include groups that transcend the boundaries of ethnicity, nationality and gender. Hence, in the production, Kuo had the gay son adopt a nine-month-old dying baby struggling with AIDS.[53]

In the programme for the 1993 staging, Kuo talks about the symbolism of the adoption:

> The universal love and magnanimity of many gays enable their lives to become part of a living entity more significant than the continuation of blood and ethnic ties, and the nation; rather than spelling death for their family genealogies, they expand the meanings of continuity.[54]

Instead of reading Ah Hai's homosexuality and mortality as killing off his patrilineal line and rural community, the adoption of a baby dying of AIDS reinvents the meaning of a Chinese family. Corroborating this subversion of Confucian heteronormativity is the ending where the audience hears the uncle's voice. As the most senior surviving man in the paternal family, he supposedly represents absolute patriarchy. This is highlighted by his repeated insistence that Ah Hai is morally obliged to perpetuate the family line. However, at the end the uncle subverts expectations by announcing the names of Ah Hai and his adopted son 'Si Wen' after reading their predecessors in the Lin genealogy. The Chinese patriarch's voice now symbolizes a familial acceptance of queerness and diversity in kinship: he implicitly embraces Ah Hai's homosexuality and by implication, validates his life partner, River, and their relationship which has made the adoption possible. The significance of the diversity and queerness in such a family model goes further when considering recent developments. After the repeal of 377A, the state has asserted that it will safeguard the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman. In response, Pink Dot 2023 called for the celebration of all families, including non-heteronormative ones. Twenty years ago, the play has already offered a vision of what such a family could look like.

In the wider Sinosphere of how queer individuals negotiate their identities, life journeys and relationships for family acceptance, the significance of *The Next Generations* could be further gleaned by turning to the depiction of Chinese familial acceptance and anxiety over genealogical continuity in Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993). In Chinese societies, the red envelope signifies a renewal and forging of family ties, old and new. Towards the end of the film, Mr Kao gifts Wei-tung's partner Simon one filled with cash as gratitude for 'taking care' of his son; this constitutes acceptance of an outsider into the family and is an important recognition of the gay relationship. When Simon is surprised that Mr Kao had kept mum despite knowing their status, Mr Kao's response was, had he not lied, he would not have gotten his grandson. In other words, the acceptance of Simon and his relationship with Wei-tung is conditional. A sham marriage staged to keep up with appearances involved the use of Wei Wei's body for surrogacy, which enables the continuity of the Kaos' genealogy. In exchange, she gets a green card to stay in the United States by marrying Wei-tung.[55]

The anxiety over dying heirless and gaining familial acceptance is also depicted in a recent Netflix documentary *All in My Family* directed by Hao Wu (2019). The gay protagonist and his partner, both of Chinese descent and living in the United States, satisfy the wishes of the former's family by sustaining the patrilineal line through surrogacy. All protagonists in *All in My Family*, *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Next Generations* are queer and the only surviving heir in their respective families, and their individual situation seems to suggest queer Chinese lives can only find self-fulfilment and happiness by living away from their immediate families. Nevertheless, all queer protagonists are variously negotiating their sexuality, familial acceptance and striving for the continuity of their respective genealogies. In the same year – 1993 – when *The Wedding Banquet* was made and twenty-seven years before *All in My Family* premiered, I conclude that *The Next Generations* presents a highly progressive model of queer kinship, even in today's context:

it forgoes the option of surrogacy for adopting a nine-month-old AIDS baby who would not survive, let alone perpetuate the family line. This is a family where the patriarch recognizes the legitimacy of this queer baby and family for incorporation in the Lins' genealogy. Together with his mother and sisters, Ah Hai forms a symbolic alliance of benevolence and universal love which redefines the meaning of queer kinship.[56]

Conclusions

When homosexuality was still a crime in Singapore and AIDS a global crisis in the 1990s, *Another Tribe, Borrowed Time* and *The Next Generations* played an important role in queer representation and challenging heteronormativity. Benefitting from an Occidentalist bilingual education system and a more relaxed cultural environment, the creators of *Another Tribe* and *Borrowed Time* enjoyed access to queer Western and Sinophone popular culture and literature in a patriarchal and conservative society grappling with the challenges brought about by economic development and cultural liberalization. Amidst a landscape dominated by homophobic tropes in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular culture in the 1990s, the importance of local queer representation is not just a matter of seeing people who may share similar cultures or predicaments, even if expressed through a familiar language such as Mandarin, it is also about audience engagement with stories articulated by local actors with home accents, rooted in specific and localized contexts, in which they have lived and experienced. In addition, the small theatres in which these plays were performed were conducive for experimentation, offered a sense of inclusiveness and intimacy for actors and audiences, and evoked empathy for actual people who are oppressed in real lives but afforded representation in theatre.

While the three plays may not have intentionally set out to queer and decolonize Singapore's postcolonial language policy and anti-Western stance, their use of Chinese in sympathetic and affirmative queer representation carries this very significance. They also live up to the historical legacy of a socially engaged Singapore Chinese theatre which was pivotal in anti-colonialism and forging a local identity. Due to the dominance of English as the working language by the 1990s, the state no longer perceived Mandarin to be as politically threatening but this also enabled theatre practitioners including Fong, Kok, Liu and Lim to engage with more challenging themes and represent queer sexualities and reach out to audiences, helped by the state-associated SPH's sponsorship of a playwriting programme that nurtured plays and also supported their press publicity, in line with state efforts of promoting the arts, despite its routine discriminatory coverage on homosexuality.

Although homosexuality has been decriminalized, Singapore theatre will remain an important platform for queer representation for the following reasons. The Singapore government has stated that to safeguard heteronormativity, same-sex marriage will be off the books in the foreseeable future.[57] Additionally, television shows and films that 'promote or justify a homosexual lifestyle' will remain proscribed.[58] Nor is the state likely to issue a formal apology for the entrapment and arrests of gay individuals who have been affected by 377A in the past. Additionally, in a world where queer representation is dominated by Euroamerican popular culture, local Chinese theatre will continue to play a crucial role in documenting queer trauma and social memory, critiquing state repression of homosexuality past and present, offering alternative kinship models, and embodying a local voice shaped by specific socio-political conditions within the wider Sinophone world, which is crucial to thinking and researching on queer literature in the Sinosphere.

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7 In 1983, the then prime minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew expressed anxiety over falling birth rates. See Kuan Yew Lee, 'Talent for the Future', *Strait Times*, 15 August 1983.

8 *Straits Times* , 'Shared Values Should Help Us Develop a Singaporean Identity', 6 January 1991. The 'Shared Values' refer to: 'Nation before community and society above self', 'Family as the basic unit of society', 'Regard and community support for the individual', 'Consensus instead of contention', 'Racial and religious harmony' See Singapore Government, *Shared Values* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1991).

9 Between 1989 and 1994, based on cases covered in the news, sixty-seven men were convicted under criminal charges of molestation, and were punished with jail sentences of two to six months and/or floggings of, or a fine of S$600 to S$2,000. See Leong, '"Straight" Times', 166.

10 Leong, '"Straight" Times', 166.

11 Goh, 'Gays' Fault'.

12 See For negative stereotypes in Hong Kong cinema, see Travis Kong, 'Queering Masculinity in Hong Kong Movies', in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Laikwan Pang and Day Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 57–80.

13 According to Otto Fong, *The Wedding Banquet* ran for a full year at Picturehouse, a downtown cinema.

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20 Otto Fong, 方永晋. *Yizu* 异族 [*Another Tribe*], in *Xijuhe* 1992–2002 戏剧盒1992–2002 [Drama Box 1992–2002], ed. Li Shiju, He Xiwei, Liu Jieqi and Su Shixiong (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2004), 129.

21 Fong, *Yizu*, 129.

22 Leong, 'Walking', 15.

23 Ibid., 16. The most infamous anti-gay crackdown was in 1993, when twelve men were nabbed at Tanjong Rhu, which used to be a well-known cruising ground. Those sentenced between two- and six-month imprisonment were also punished with caning of three strokes each. Adding further insult to injury was the publishing of the alleged offenders' names in major newspapers. See *Straits Times* , '12 Men Nabbed in Anti-Gay Operation at Tanjong Rhu', 23 November 1993. Boo Junfeng made a short film named *Tanjong Rhu* (2009) about the entrapment incident.

24 Fong, *Yizu*, 131.

25 See Suk-Wai Cheong, 'You Must Cook to Be in My Play', *Straits Times*, 1 September 1999 and Cai Bin Peng, 彭彩彬, *Xinxiu Hong Guo'an deng wutai yan 'tongzhi'* 新秀洪国安 登舞台演'同志' [Newbie Wallace Ang Plays a 'Homosexual'], *Shin Min Daily News*, 28 August 1999.

26 Clarissa Oon, 'A Rich, Wordless Score of Two Different Worlds', *Straits Times*, 14 September 1999.

27 In an earlier article, I discussed how live presence is crucial to provoking intellectual engagement in Singapore theatre. See How Wee Ng, 'Drawing from Grotowski and Beyond: Kuo Pao Kun's Discourse on Audiences in Singapore in the 1980s', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2020): 238–50.

28 Beng Huat Chua, 'Theatre, Social Critique and Politics', in *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*, ed. Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng (Singapore: Times Editions—Marshall Cavendish, 2004), 320.

29 Peterson, 'Theatre', 147.

30 Sy Ren Quah, 'Intellectual Consciousness and the Negation of The Intellectual Class: Kuo Pao Kun's Pre-Detention Drama and Its Context', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2020): 214.

31 *Straits Times* , 'Exposed: The Dark Secrets of Sister Fong', 27 May 1976.

32 How Wee Ng, 'Multilingual', in *Drama Box: 30 Keywords*, ed. Sy Ren Quah (Singapore: Drama Box Ltd, 2022), 9822a.

33 Kuan Yew Lee, 'Politics, Economics, Security and Your Future', Address by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at The Seminar on Communism and Democracy, 28 April 1971, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19710428.pdf

34 Chok Tong Goh, 'To Serve, to Keep Singapore Thriving and Growing', Speech for the Swearing in Ceremony of the Prime Minister Mr. Goh Chok Tong and his Cabinet in the City Hall Chamber on Wednesday 28 November 1990. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/gct19901128.pdf

35 Then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has asserted that '[s]omeone who knows that he belongs to a rich and ancient culture will not be easily seduced by plausible but

unsound ideas derived from a superficial understanding of another culture'. See Hui Ling Wong, 'Use Mother Tongue to Preserve, Transmit Values', *Straits Times*, 7 September 1994.

36 Daniel P. S. Goh, 'From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore', *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 1 (2008): 232–52.

37 Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, 'State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore', in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 204.

38 Nirmala PuruShotam, *Negotiating Multiculturalism: Disciplining Difference in Singapore* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 67.

39 Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Religious Reasons in a Secular Public Sphere: Debates in the Media about Homosexuality', in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Ah Eng Lai (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008), 420.

40 Heng, 'Tiptoe', 88.

41 Sy Ren Quah, 'The 1990s Generation', in *Drama Box: 30 Keywords*, ed. Sy Ren Quah (Singapore: Drama Box Ltd, 2020), 24.

42 Quah, '1990s', 24.

43 A review of *Another Tribe* in the English national paper describes it as 'quite a leap for Mandarin theatre, which has for decades been dominated by conservative Chinese classic plays'. See Beng Choo Goh, 'A better tomorrow', *Straits Times*, 16 October 1992.

44 See Laoda Han 韩劳达. *Beicang zhong de kusi* – Houdai de juli 悲怆中的苦思—— 《后代》的剧力 [Ruminations from a Tragedy: The Dramatic Power of *The Next Generations*]. *Lianhe Zaobao*, 27 November 1993; Heng and Devan 1995, 'State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality and Race in Singapore'; Kuo, Pao, Kun. 郭宝崑, *Guanyu* Houdai *de xiju jiegou*关于《后代》的戏剧结构 [On the Dramatic Structure of *The Next Generations*], in Festival of Asian Performing Arts Programme to *The Next Generations*, 1993 and Sy Ren Quah 柯思仁, *Shuxie nvxing shengming, huiying fazhan xushi*书写女性生命,回应发展叙事 [Writing about Women's Lives: Responding to Development Narratives], in Lim Soon Lan 林春兰. Houdai, Shengzai Riji: *Lin Chunlan jubenji* 《后代》、《生仔日记》:林春兰剧本集 ['*The Next Generations*'; '*A Midwife's Diary*': *A Play Collection of Lim Soon Lan*] (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2018), ix.

45 Yun Yu 余云, *Cong beiju zhong xunzhao renxing de guanghui*从悲剧中寻找人性的光辉 [Searching for a Bright Spot of Humanity in a Tragedy'], in Festival of Asian Performing Arts Programme to *The Next Generations*, 1993. and How Wee Ng 黄浩威. *Geng hongkuan de shengming yanxu* 更宽宏的生命延续 [A Broader Continuity of Life], in *Xi ju xianchang – Xinjiapo dangdai huawen juzuo xuan 1* 戏聚现场 —— 新加坡当代华文剧作选1 [*Scenes: A Collection of Contemporary Singapore Chinese Plays Volume 1*], ed. Sy Ren Quah and Heng Leun Kok (Singapore: Global Publishing Ltd, 2010), 194.

46 Heng and Devan, 'State Fatherhood', 202.

47 Bernice Chan 陈国慧, Houdai *de banyan meixue*, 《后代》的搬演美学 [The Performance Aesthetics of *The Next Generations*]. *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 1 December 2010.

48 Heng and Devan, 'State Fatherhood', 202.

49 Ibid.

50 Lim Soon Lan 林春兰, 'Houdai 后代', in Houdai, Shengzai Riji: Lin Chunlan jubenji《后代》、《生仔日记》:林春兰剧本集 ['The Next Generations'; 'A Midwife's Diary': A Play Collection of Lim Soon Lan] (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2018), 56.

51 Yun Yu 余云. *Yuanqu de jiayuan* 远去的家园 [A Disappearing Homeland]. *Lianhe Zaobao*,

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52 Nirmala PuruShotam, 'Between Compliance and Resistance: Women and the Middle-class Way of Life in Singapore', in *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia*, ed. Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens (London: Routledge, 1998), 159.

53 Soon Lan Lim 林春兰, *Zixu* 自序 [Foreword] In Houdai, Shengzai Riji: *Lin Chunlan jubenji* 《后代》、《生仔日记》:林春兰剧本集 ['*The Next Generations*'; '*A Midwife's Diary*': *A Play Collection of Lim Soon Lan*] (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2018), xviii.

54 Kuo, 'Dramatic Structure'.

55 See Song Hwee Lim, *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006) for an analysis of *The Wedding Banquet*.

56 Quah, 'Writing', xi.

57 Hsien Loong Lee, 'National Day Rally', 21 August 2022, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2022-English

58 Media Development Authority, 'Free-To-Air Television Programme Code', n.d., 18. https://www.imda.gov.sg/-/media/imda/files/regulation-licensing-and-consultations/content-and-standards-classification/video-games/industry_tv_contentguidelines_ftatvprogcode1.pdf

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Chapter 13

CUI ZI'EN ON QUEER LITERATURE: A CONVERSATION

Hongwei Bao and Cui Zi'en

Cui Zi'en is one of the best-known queer writers, filmmakers and activists from the PRC. Born in Harbin in 1958, Cui received a master's degree in literature from the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He worked as a screenwriter at Beijing Youth Studio and later as an associate professor at the Department of Film Studies at Beijing Film Academy. His literary works are fine examples of avant-garde Chinese literature, and his films have heralded queer Chinese cinema. An early organizer of the Beijing Queer Film Festival, Cui is also a pioneer of China's queer social movement. Cui's literary works include *Peach-Coloured Lips*, *Enter the Clowns*, *Bed of Roses* and *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories*. His short story collection, *Platinum Bible of the Public Toilet* was published in English by Duke University Press in 2024. In this conversation with scholar and writer Hongwei Bao that took place in February 2020, Cui talks about his career as a queer writer and his literary works.[1]

BAO: When did you start writing?

CUI: Simply put, I call the time I prepared myself for writing the classical age, my writing years the print-media age, and my filmmaking years the DV (digital video) age.

BAO: When did the classical age start?

CUI: The classical age was the period when I grew up. It included my undergraduate and master's years, when I studied classical Chinese literature. But reading classical Chinese literature can be traced to a much earlier period. It started when I was in primary school.

As a child, as soon as I learned how to read and write, I started writing. I did many scribbles; I also wrote something more serious. In the fourth grade, I started writing short stories. Before that, I wrote some poems. Of course, I also wrote a lot of prose and many essays, as was the expectation for a good student at the time; they seemed easy to me. At school, I already felt I was a university student, at least I could write more and longer than many university students. That was the print-media age of my life. I wrote a lot on paper and very few of them have survived. This was unlike the digital age when you can save your writing and later retrieve it through a keyword search.

Although much of my writing during the time was blown away by the wind of time, they gave me a lot of power: the power of independent thinking. No one can teach people how to think independently, but one must work hard to think about the world like God, trying to make sense of the world and take control of their life. Such power kept growing in me, outside the official system or mainstream society.

I was a top student before high school; this was a result of the system. Later I studied classical Chinese literature at university; that was also a decision made possible by the system. The system gave me a social identity. But I knew from the outset I can never become part of the system. As an outsider to the system, I have an impulse to destroy and reconstruct the system. I see myself as an explorer, always discontent with how things are and always having an impulse to critique, change and reconstruct the world.

BAO: You became aware of your sexuality at an early age. Did you explore your sexuality in your writing?

CUI: I didn't in those days. The writings I did when I was young, although original, were still influenced by other people's language. A lot of it was conditioned by the Chinese textbooks I read. They constrained my thoughts and imagination. This was understandable for a school pupil: if one didn't follow the convention and style, they'd feel their writing lacked legitimacy. Although I had my own independent spirit, my energy was forced into a rigid framework. It was the square framework of Chinese characters. It constrained a lot of things. Within the framework, I didn't have freedom to create. In fact, I didn't feel a sense of creative freedom until I went to university. At college, I felt that my writing still needed to be approved by the teachers. The Department of Chinese where I studied had creative writing classes and theory classes. They all required writing articles and essays, and they all had to be graded by the teachers. Of course, I was very suspicious of the teachers. I knew that I could write better than them. I started to write about the things I wanted to write. As I read more, I started to understand the world better. I also developed the skills to write what I wanted and how I wanted to. Although that part of my writing was not recognized by others, I couldn't care less.

The university I attended had a credit system, which meant one could graduate if they acquired enough credits. But when I got home, my parents warned: if you complete the study in two years, you could graduate with required credits, but no one would treat you as a university graduate because no undergraduate degrees would take only two years to complete. Despite having completed my university credits, I stayed on campus for another two years. Most of the time I would read in the library. The library was my classroom, and there I enjoyed complete freedom.

BAO: What did you write at the time?

CUI: I wrote all kinds of things, without limits. I had a student identity to protect me, so I could read and write freely as I wanted to. In fact, this was also true to my later life. After graduation I taught at a film academy. I only gave lectures to students for two and a half years, and yet being a teacher became my lifelong identity, and I could live on a teacher's salary. I started writing novels and short stories when I wasn't allowed to teach. After that, I was put into a position as a professional screenwriter. In the Youth Film Studio, I worked as a screenwriter for ten years. During the ten years, I had complete freedom to write. I wrote many novels and short stories. Although my filmmaking was outside the system, there was an institutional framework to support my filmmaking.

This sounds like a paradox. I could have graduated early from college, but I had to stay on campus and remain registered as a student for two more years. Later on, even though the work I was doing was outside the system, and my work was completely disapproved of by the system, the system supported me in doing that work. Such is the complex relationship between the individual, society and history. This is like a torque, which maintains its composition by twisting one axis after another.

BAO: This shows the important of having an independent mind. Many people simply go with the flow and eventually get incorporated into the system. But you managed to do what you wanted to do within the system.

CUI: This was not entirely true. Such a result was also due to the system itself. The system is like a person, and it has a particular type of personality. It chooses its own people. As I'm not its people, it kicks me aside. But it also feels that I'm not that kind of direct democracy symbol. I'm an indirect democracy symbol, or a symbol that's not productive, even

though I have participated in the queer movement. When one risks being imprisoned, they find that their position is a particularly ambiguous one. Because of that ambiguity, they avoid becoming a prisoner.

BAO: What was your first novel?

CUI: After 1989, I lived in Japan for half a year. At that time, I came up with the idea of writing what I considered to be my first full-length novel. I started working on it after I went back to China. It was *Peach-Coloured Lips*, my first book. The novel had a very clear structure. I had originally planned to spend a long time on it. The book was completed sooner than I had expected because the God helped me: I lost my teaching position. I was very busy when I was teaching as I often had to teach eleven courses. Suddenly I couldn't teach anymore and ended up having a lot of time to myself. So I finished writing the novel earlier than originally planned. *Peach-Coloured Lips* was written between 1991 and 1992 and revised in 1993. Then I spent some time taking the manuscript to different publishers trying to get it published. That was in the print-media era.

I'm a very independent person. Since childhood I have known that I must face everything by myself. I took my manuscript directly to the publishers. I only had one copy. Photocopying was not that common and was also very costly at the time. I walked into various publishing houses with my manuscript and asked to see the editors. I visited more than a dozen publishing houses and was eventually rejected by all of them. An editor really liked my manuscript and even offered me a contract. The editor-in-chief told him that they couldn't risk it because the novel was gay-themed. The book was not published in mainland China until 2003. Prior to this, the book was published in Hong Kong in 1997. When Huasheng Publishing House was established, they published the first book titled *The Stories of He Him She Her*, a

collection of short stories from across the Strait. The book contained one of my short stories. The second book they published was my book *Peach-Coloured Lips* and that was in 1997.

I finished the manuscript in 1993 and published the book in 1997. This book reveals an interesting situation: I wrote in simplified Chinese characters, and yet my first novel was published in traditional Chinese. The publishers around me all rejected my manuscript, and yet a publisher in Hong Kong accepted it before I had an opportunity to visit Hong Kong. Life was full of paradoxes.

At the same time, several literary magazines published my short stories and novellas. Some even tried to publish the entire novel. For example, an editor from *The Zhongshan Literary Journal* thought my novel could pioneer a new literary trend. He spent a lot of time and effort promoting my work, but it wasn't successful. At that time, the literary world liked creating new genres. I almost became the figure head of a new literary genre. But these efforts were eventually washed away by the so-called mainstream literature. So I don't believe in things like literary genres, literary history and film history. They are all set up by political power, or by the power of a particular social group. A group of people must have sufficient political influence so they can create a trend in literature or film.

BAO: How did you write? What made you so productive?

CUI: In those ten years, I kept on writing. I held my writing time sacred. I usually got up at one or two o'clock at night and wrote until midday. The twelve-hour period was my most productive writing time. The time after one o'clock in the afternoon was for me to do physical exercises or write for a living. I wrote film and book reviews for various newspapers and magazines. I adhered to this schedule for ten years.

I was working on several projects at the same time. When I was working on *Peach-Coloured Lips*, I was also writing *Bed of Roses* and *Enter the Clowns. Enter the Clowns* was the first book to be completed. *Bed of Roses* and *Enter the Clowns* had different endings from *Peach-Coloured Lips*. I then went back to edit *Enter the Clowns*. I felt that it shouldn't be as complete and conventional as *Peach-Coloured Lips*. It should be more fragmented, allowing for multiple narratives, and my style should be freer and more imaginative. I felt that I needed to write a completely different text, not the type of literature in the conventional sense. So I put together philosophical musings, short plays and diaries. That was a great experience.

After finishing *Enter the Clowns*, I felt that my literary ideas had been truly liberated. I fully expressed my dissatisfaction with existing literature since childhood. After finishing *Enter the Clowns*, I worked on *Bed of Roses*. I felt I could build something up. If *Enter the Clowns* is fragmentary, messy and uncontrollable, in *Bed of Roses*, a fictional text is merged with two drama texts to form a longer text. Strictly speaking, *Enter the Clowns* and *Bed of Roses* are not novels; they are what I call 'long texts'.

I had a big desk in my room, the kind that resembled a teacher's office desk. I put four or five stacks of papers on the top. Each stack of paper represented a book project, and they kept moving every day. For example, when I moved *Enter the Clowns* in front of me, the project of *Enter the Clowns* began, and its fictional world started to unfold. When I put it aside, its characters began to rest and fall asleep. Then I picked up another stack of paper, which was *Bed of Roses*. I started working on it. And then I put that aside and started *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories*. I was writing a series of short stories and novellas at the same time. They were like different planets in the universe. I was doing the job of arranging stars into constellations. To be more precise, I was observing the earth from the vantage

points of various stars. *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories* is about earthlings arriving on other planets, not the other way around. People on earth are like monsters. They are monsters when they go to other planets, because they are full of themselves. They misunderstand other planets. People from other planets criticize the earthling culture as the stories unfold.

When the human body needs to rest, the memory returns to the body, and this memory needs to be processed. So I started to write semi-autobiographical accounts about my own childhood and adolescence. Or perhaps I should say that I started to reflect on that experience. It's a light-illuminating-shadow type of writing that is self-reflexive. Apart from this, I was planning a philosophical novel called *New New Testament*. It's about Jesus having twelve disciples. Among these were Marx, Mao Zedong and Hu Ge. That was an idea that was never actualized.

In a certain way, Chinese society is not necessarily a homophobic society. For example, when I took my book manuscripts to the publishers, the first and second editors who had read my manuscript were usually very enthusiastic. My manuscripts were rejected because of political reasons. All these reasons were on political grounds, not on cultural grounds. I delivered the manuscripts in person every time. I was what people would describe as an effeminate person. In the Western context, this image may well be read as gay or sissy and rejected by mainstream society. But in the Chinese context, people would describe me as bookish or nerdy. They often conflated being feminine with being bookish. I had a naturally fair skin, and in China I didn't bask in the sun. So I fit into the stereotype of being a fair-skinned and fragile scholar. This gave me some bonus points in China at the time. But now, this type of person would be cast in a negative light.

BAO: This might have to do with the popular respect for writers and intellectuals in Chinese society at that time. Today's society doesn't seem to respect writers and intellectuals very much, which is a shame.

CUI: Yes, that was one of the reasons. This brings us back to the topic of print media. In the age of print media, the person had to write each word on the paper. One opened a thick stack of paper, wrote on it with a pen word by word, and then made corrections on every page. All the traces of that person were imprinted on the paper. When reading, readers could easily detect the movement of the author's body. Their perseverance flowed on the paper. Nowadays, when people read works on the computer, they can't see the author's handwriting or body at all.

BAO: Can I ask why you stopped writing?

CUI: I stopped writing after ten years. This was largely due to the shift from the print media to digital media. Everyone started to write directly on the computer. I was unwilling to make that transition. I chose not to cross over. I think the two modes of writing belong to two language families. I can only write very ordinary things such as Emails on my computer.

BAO: Your works often contain a great deal of fantastical elements, especially in *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories*. Why is this the case? Is your work meant to critique society or is it a form of self-expression, or an experiment to test how far imagination can travel?

CUI: My literary works can be divided into three types. The first type is pure literature. It follows the conventions of a classical text; for example, there should be characters, a plot and a theme. All things are explained clearly in a piece of work, with narratives and contexts. *Peach Coloured Lips* belongs to this category. This type also includes some of my

short stories and novellas, such as *Uncle's Secular Life* and *I Love Shi Dabo*. Many of them are related to my personal experience, to China's social history, and to the conventional literary form. Some of these books were reprinted several times and thus accumulated a larger readership. They are easier to read and understand.

There is another type: the pseudo-science fiction stories. This body of works focuses on the reflection and criticism of the earthling culture from the perspective of extraterrestrials.

There is also the third type, which is dedicated to literary experimentation. It includes works such as *Enter the Clowns* and *Bed of Roses*. It pays more attention to the mechanism of language and departs from the conventional literary language. This category is not only about protagonists and narratives, but also about how we understand and use literary techniques and methods, and how we see literature itself. Without this body of work, my work wouldn't be complete.

BAO: Your literary works are usually very theoretical. Why is this the case?

CUI: My literary writing has a strong theoretical undertone because I don't separate writing from theorization, and my interest in theory coexists with my interest in storytelling. This results in the sacrifice of narratives. I like tearing narratives apart and reflecting on the harms that narratives can do to human beings.

Narratives are usually dramatic, and dramatic relationships are often about power relations: who is a protagonist and who is a supporting character, who is a hero and who is a villain, who is a top and who is a bottom, who is an attacker and who is a receiver, whose fate is what, whose destiny is perfect – these are all old and clichéd conventions. The convention is rooted in *A Dream of Red*

Mansions. *A Dream of Red Mansions* has its own narrative universe: it's an enclosed system. This is not the system I want to stay in. That's why in my long texts – I don't call them novels – I use theoretical reflections to break up the illusion created by narrative conventions.

BAO: Some literary critics contextualize your writing within the framework of postmodernism. How do you feel about this interpretation?

CUI: This is not the only way to approach my work. I consider myself a postmodern person, but some works such as *Uncle's Secular Life* and *Peach-Coloured Lips* series are not postmodern or modern texts; they are classical texts. These works belong to my classical era. With these works, I bade goodbye to the classical era. Writing is my way to preserve each era.

I usually don't read the things I've written because I can get bored easily. But when I read some of the works I have written, I think to myself: this writer writes very well. Who is the person? He has not compromised with anything, neither the market, nor the so-called pure literature. He has his own world, and that world is very organic. I like this writer.

BAO: Do you have your favourite piece of work?

CUI: I value *Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories* series very much because it hasn't been interpreted and it's difficult to interpret. There is also *Ace of Hearts Blows the Horn*, which is one of my last and also most obscure works.

Appendix: Cui Zi'en's Works

Novels and Short Story Collections

桃色嘴唇 [Peach-Coloured Lips]. Hong Kong: Worldson Books, 1997; Zhuhai: Zhuhai publishing House, 2003.

丑角登场 [Enter the Clowns]. Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House, 1998: Taipei: Showe Publishing, 2023.

玫瑰床榻 [Bed of Roses]. Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House, 1998.

三角城的童话 [Fairy Tales of the Triangle City]. Hong Kong: Worldson Books, 1998.

我爱史大勃 [I Love Shi Dabo]. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2000.

舅舅的人间烟火 [Uncle's Secular Life]. Zhuhai: Zhuhai Publishing House, 2003.

伪科幻故事 [Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories]. Zhuhai: Zhuhai Publishing House, 2003; Taipei: Showe Publishing, 2023.

红桃A吹响号角 [Ace of Hearts Blows the Horn]. Zhuhai: Zhuhai Publishing House, 2003.

有谁上过我的床 [Who Have Been in Bed with Me]. Beijing: Black and Blue Literature, 2003.

胭脂的下落 [The Whereabouts of Rouge]. Yunnan: Yunnan People's Press, 2006.

Literary and Film Criticism

李渔小说论稿 [Critical Essays on the Novels of Li Yü]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1987.

青春的悲剧 [Tragedy of the Youth]. Beijing: China Peace Press, 1988.

电影羁旅 [Travel in Film]. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 1993.

艺术家的宇宙 [The Artist's Universe]. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1993.

第一观众 [The First Audience]. Beijing: Xiandai Publishing House, 2003.

艺术家万岁 [Long Live the Artist]. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Publishing House, 2004.

光影记忆 [Memories of Light and Shadow]. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2005.

Work in English Translation

Cui Zi'en. *Platinum Bible of the Public Toilet*, edited and with an introduction by Lisa Rofel and Petrus Liu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024.

Interview

白睿文 [Michael Berry]. 丑角登场:崔子恩的酷儿影像 [Enter the Clowns: Cui Zi'en's Queer Cinema]. Taipei: Showe Publishing, 2023.

Notes

1 This interview was conducted in Mandarin and online on 26 February 2020. The text was transcribed from audio recording and then translated into English. The audio transcript has been edited for publication purposes.

Chapter 14

Queer Taiwanese Literature as World Literature: A Conversation

Howard Chiang with Hangping Xu

This public conversation was held between Howard Chiang (CHIANG) and Hangping Xu (XU) on 27 April 2022 at the Centre for Taiwan Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. It was organized in conjunction with the *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books and sponsored by the Taiwan Academy, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Los Angeles, the Ministry of Culture, Republic of China (Taiwan). We have edited the transcript for publication purposes.

XU: You studied biochemistry and psychology for your undergraduate. Then you did a master's degree in Quantitative Social science before you went on to Princeton and received your doctoral degree in History. This is a fascinating intellectual trajectory, as you have crossed boundaries between the STEM and social science, between quantitative and interpretive methods. Maybe you can start by sharing your story, how you became a historian, and your amazing intellectual path.

CHIANG: Thank you for noting my cross-disciplinary background. This unusual background has really helped me to shape my intellectual curiosity and the questions I try to

address in my work. As an undergrad, I majored in biochemistry and psychology because I had wanted to become a psychiatrist or mental health scientist. I also minored in Gender Studies, by the way, so my interest in gender and sexuality studies is probably the most consistent motif running from my undergrad years to the present. At USC, where I went for college, one of the core requirements was to take a General Education (GE) course in the humanities. To fulfil that requirement, I took a course on the history of gender and sexuality with Lois Banner. Initially, because I considered the humanities to be the weakest part of my intellectual profile, I asked Lois to give me permission to take her course for a Pass-or-Fail grade. USC allowed us to do that for one of the GEs. However, one to two weeks into the semester, I was blown away by the course content. I came to realize how creative and innovative historical knowledge can be, let alone the exciting conversations and debates that were quickly evolving in the history of gender and sexuality. So after earning an A in that course, I decided to minor in Gender Studies and take more classes with Lois.

As an undergrad minor in Gender Studies, I actually took two graduate seminars: one in Feminist Theory (taught by Carla Kaplan, a professor of American literature) and another in LGBTQ Studies (taught by Joseph Hawkins, an anthropologist of Japan). It's funny when I come to think about it, because other than History, I think Literature and Anthropology are perhaps the two most important disciplines with which my ongoing work engages on an intellectual level. Anyway, it was in the context of those two grad seminars that I came across the work of historians and philosophers of science, such as Michel Foucault, Thomas Kuhn, Ian Hacking, and others. I also became familiarized with postcolonial criticisms of this kind of scholarship, e.g. via the work of Ann Laura Stoler. I decided to come out of the 'closet' and situate my passion not in becoming a lab scientist or a physician, but in historicizing and

contextualizing the conditions of scientific knowledge. I was totally taken away by the history of sexology, and in my MA study at Columbia, I was fortunate to have taken a course taught by Rebecca Jordan-Young on 'Science and Sexualities'. That seminar confirmed my aspiration to become a historian of science. I went on to do doctoral work in the History of Science program at Princeton, where I met Ben Elman (my dissertation advisor). At Princeton, history of science students are situated in the History Department, and our degrees are awarded in History (rather than History of Science per se). But you can see the resemblance between the kind of work I had been reading since undergrad (e.g. Foucault, Stoler, etc.) and the kind of scholarship I eventually produced (e.g. the genealogy of sex change in modern China).

I guess I will just add one more note on this question of interdisciplinarity: at the moment, I am just so grateful to my early self for having taken courses in biology and psychology, because that part of my education experience has proven to be so instrumental for my more advanced research on the history of these scientific subjects. Some of the technical terminologies that I come across now in the history of psychoanalysis and biomedicine remind me of those undergrad years when I was first exposed to those terms. That foundational moment of knowledge acquisition smoothened my current engagement with the history and philosophy of these disciplines.

XU: You are one of the most eclectic and innovative scholars. I admire your abilities to organically bring together various fields into a critical conversation with history and historiography, fields such as literary studies, cultural studies, queer studies, post-colonial studies, to name but a few. For our event today, I am particularly interested in the intersection of literature and history. Some of the most respected historians of modern China such as Prasenjit

Duara and Tani Barlow all take literature seriously in their historical and genealogical work. Why should a historian care about literature, and how do you place literary texts in your knowledge production as a historian?

CHIANG: I have a short answer as an easy way out of your question and a longer one that I think will be of greater interest to the audience here. First, the short answer: in Chinese, we have an old saying: 文史哲不分家 meaning that one cannot separate the study of history from the study of literature and isolate either from the study of philosophy. I think that if you look at the work of people like Hayden White, Foucault, and their interlocutors, this dogma has continued to hold sway even in the humanities in the West. Hence, it can be said that it is intuitive for historians to care about literature, or literary scholars to appreciate historicism. But of course, an old saying is just an old saying, and we need to dig deeper into the rationale behind it.

So here comes my longer answer, which comes in two parts. First, we can consider your question from a *methodological* standpoint: that is, in essence, the interpretive question that binds historians and literary scholars together is concerned with how and why we read *texts*. A text, including an image, denotes a web of inter-relations: this can be the relationship between the author and the reader, the artist and the viewer, or the relationship between the text and its original context of production or an unforeseen context of reception. Each of these relationships stands for a historical traffic. Whether we are reading a novel, or a series of archival documents relating to one event, historians and literary scholars alike must always educate our mind so that we can bring about the significance of the texts in a way that is meaningful to both the past and the present. Relatedly, philosophical historians like White have pointed to the similarity in the narrative constructions of historical discourse and fictional writing.

This reframes the question of the status of the text from the standpoint of interpretation to that of re-presentation.

I know these are rather abstract ways of pitching History and Literature, so I want to offer you a second component to my longish answer. We can consider your question from the specific standpoint of *evidence*. As a historian, I consider literature to be an invaluable genre of source material. It is true that some of my colleagues might critique fiction for its lack of evidentiary bearing to social reality. However, I would like to remind them about the importance of literary texts for some fields of historical inquiry: such as LGBTQ history. When I edited the *Global Encyclopaedia of LGBTQ History* (2019), it was immediately obvious that for some time periods and regions of human history, especially when sexual dissidents were heavily suppressed and even criminalized, we need to rely on fictional sources to read between the lines about the 'love that dare not to speak its name'. Sometimes poetry and literary expressions are the *only* sources we have about queer subjects in the past. By dismissing the importance of these texts, we would be reproducing the very mechanism that silenced the historical subjects in the first place. Finally, in my book *After Eunuchs* (2018), I use science fiction literature to follow the ways in which claims of scientific epistemology came to be absorbed by and filtered through literary production, and that allowed me to gauge the dissemination of scientific knowledge in a reliable way.

XU: Let's define the basic terminology for our conversation today, that is, the very title of this event, namely, Queer Taiwanese literature as world literature. First, queer. In your second book *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (2021), you very carefully tease out a genealogy of Chinese-language terms *tongzhi* and *ku'er* in order to insist on the singularity of local articulations while acknowledging global circulations of knowledge and discourse. Could you help our

audience unpack the cultural and political work that the term queer performs, especially as it is related to queer Taiwanese literature?

CHIANG: You mentioned an important keyword in the Sinophone world that has come to designate non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality: *tongzhi* 同志. As you know, *tongzhi* literally means ‘comrade’ or ‘common will’ in Mandarin Chinese. It has a long history, and its most important usage goes back to Sun Yat-sen who talked about the incompleteness of the Chinese revolution. Since 1949, however, it has become a commonplace parlance in socialist China to refer to friends, acquaintances and like-minded folks. What is interesting is that in the late twentieth century, activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan began to appropriate the term and subvert its meaning to come to designate queerness, likely due to the similar pronunciation of the first character in *tongzhi* and the first character in *tongxinglian* 同性戀 (homosexuality). In any case, this is a crucial historical point: precisely because *tongzhi* did not have the same depth of socialist usage in Hong Kong and Taiwan as it did in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), it made it possible for queer activists in these Sinophone regions to rekindle the term. The film maker Edward Lam used *tongzhi* to designate the First Hong Kong Gay & Lesbian Film Festival in 1989, and indeed since then Hong Kong cinema has featured strong homoerotic and gender transgressive themes.

In contrast, and this is where queer Taiwanese literature comes in, the cultural scene in Taiwan pioneered the production of *tongzhi* literature. This is in part why literary critic and author Ta-wei Chi has called *tongzhi* literature a Taiwanese invention. In 1994, students at National Taiwan University formed Taiwan’s first-ever lesbian society – the Lambda society. Academic queer theory suddenly became a hot subject across college campuses. The first edition of the

earliest queer magazines, *G&L* and *Together*, were released in 1996 and 1998 respectively. A thriving queer-themed academic and publishing culture came to characterize much of the decade. Increasingly, a generation of *tongzhi* authors wrote popular novels and short fictions – including Qiu Miaojin, Tsao Li-chuan, Chu T'ien-hsin, Chu T'ien-wen, Wu Jiwen, Hong Ling, Chi Ta-wei, Hsu Yoshen, Chen Xue, Dong Qizhang, Lai Hsiang-yin, Li Ang and others. Their output consolidated a subgenre of Taiwanese literature that came to be known as '*tongzhi* literature'. In fact, as Fran Martin has noted, 'it seemed at times that not a literary competition went by without at least one prize being awarded to a *tongzhi* [同志] short story, novella, or novel'.[1] In sum, the 1990s was a very fermentative moment for queer Taiwanese literature.

Therefore, the association of the *tongzhi* rubric with films was most obvious in Hong Kong; the association of the *tongzhi* concept with literature was spearheaded in Taiwan. It was only after this 'Sinophone refraction' of the term *tongzhi* in the late twentieth century that it then got imported back into mainland China as a popular term for LGBTQ identity and activism. Of course, throughout this time, there has been a growing interaction in queer activism across Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China.

I will add a note by saying that when you mentioned the Mandarin translation of the term *ku'er* 酷兒: it literally means 'cool child'. There were other translations circulating in the 1990s Sinophone world, including *guaitai* 怪胎 (freak) for example, but due to the convergence of several trends, the *ku'er*/cool child version has become increasingly standardized. These include the effort of numerous Taipei-based authors and academics who promoted queer theory in Taiwan in 1990s, the founding of the Center for the Study of Sexualities by Josephine Ho at National Central University in Zhongli, Taoyuan City, and the effort of Chinese sociologists

such as Li Yinhe to introduce queer theory to readers in mainland China. In my book, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (2021), I talk about why any understanding of the history of *tongzhi*, as its capacious definition came to be increasingly equated with the Western notion of queer, must be incomplete if one does not account for the visibility of trans rights in the twenty-first century.

XU: Then, the other term is World Literature, which has a venerable history whose first iteration can be dated back at least to the nineteenth century when Goethe coined the term in order to imagine a cosmopolitan world in which every sovereign nation-state has their literature. What does it mean when we construe queer Taiwanese literature as world literature?

CHIANG: This is an important question, for which I should acknowledge the limit of my expertise. I am trained first and foremost as a historian, so sometimes I feel that I am not very well equipped to answer questions that are so central to the disciplinary framing of literature, including the definition of world literature. Thus, you must take what I'm about to say with a grain of salt. If we do start with Goethe's famous nineteenth-century definition of world literature, maybe the inclusion of Taiwanese literature, and acknowledged as such rather than a version of 'Chinese' literature, suggests that it's time for us to *recognize Taiwan as a sovereign nation-state*. At the very least, construing queer Taiwanese literature this way helps to resolve a contradiction in Taiwan's status in LGBTQ activism. As you may know, Taiwan is not only the first state in the Sinophone world to host an annual gay pride parade (since 2003), but it is also the first country in Asia, the largest continent in the world, to legalize same-sex marriage (in 2019). This is ironic given that Taiwan has been without official nation-state in its international standing since at least 1971, when the

China seat in the United Nations was handed over to the PRC. And yet, queer activists in both East Asia and Southeast Asia continue to look to Taiwan for inspiration.

On the one hand, I find it encouraging that LGBTQ politics can thrive outside the global hegemony of the nation-state system (that is, as viewed from Taiwan). On the other, we must ask ourselves if that is often the ultimatum faced by activists in Asia: one is forced to choose between conservative nationalism and radical sexual politics (consider the grim situation in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore). So if we adapt Goethe's definition and apply it to queer Taiwanese literature, the legitimacy given to queer literature from Taiwan, and not just Taiwanese literature, might suggest an optimistic framing of where things are going. Personally, I'd like to think, though, that that is not the only way of situating queer Taiwanese literature: nationalism should not serve as the only or ultimate framework for appreciating queer Taiwanese literary production.

If I may, I like to add two questions raised by Goethe's definition. Both concern the scale of representation. First, do larger nation-states have greater literary representation in Goethe's cosmopolitan vision of world literature? Second, if Taiwan is considered a small state, which it is in terms of area and population, is there a place for queer literature within this already small slice of the world literature pie? I do not have an answer to either of these questions, but I do hope that they serve as a point of departure for us to rethink Goethe's definition.

XU: Pascale Casanova uses a sociological approach to lay bare the system of power asymmetry, that is, the centre versus periphery matrix, in which writers from the margins negotiate with the system of symbolic power and cultural capital in order to arrive at the world republic of letters. This event at UCSB is part of the LA Times Books Festival. If we

use Casanova's sociological approach and consider international books festivals an important part of global literary circulation, how visible do you think Taiwan literature and queer Taiwanese literature has become in the past decade or so?

CHIANG: Casanova's work has been instrumental for thinking about the field of literary circulation (and I'm referencing here French theorist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'the field'), especially in terms of major/canonical literary systems vs. minor/obscured literary forms of resistance against linguistic domination. You know, there are debates in both literary and film studies about the politics of representation in festivals. Again, I cannot say that I'm an expert in literary and film studies, but I do think that the politics of recognition is something that resonates with the historical and, as you say, sociological fields. In thinking about the visibility of queer Taiwanese literature through a high-profile event like the LA Times Festival of Books, I find it encouraging that my book is showcased through a public conversation like this. This conversation allows us to talk about not only literature, which is of course important in and of itself, but also the broader context in which literary appreciation and circulation takes place. It reminds us that a piece of literature, like what I said about the notion of a 'text' earlier, represents a dense web of signification saturated in social life.

While Casanova's work is trying to think through alternative ways of framing the outlook of world literature, at its heart it still grapples with the legacy of geopolitics, including literary nationalism. By the way, this reminds me a lot of my own training in the history of science, in which there has been vibrant debates about various 'national styles' of science. If we go back to Casanova's definition, we must consider *both* the place of 'queer' in the world and the place of 'Taiwan' in the world. If both queer literature and

Taiwanese literature have been relatively marginalized in terms of social power in the world, then manoeuvring symbolic power (and cultural capital) might precisely be the key to 'arrive at' the world republic of letters. Queer Taiwanese literature in this sense functions as a 'minor literature' (a concept proposed by Guattari & Deleuze), and the idea here is that its politics of recognition does not have to be routed through major literary systems. The minor-to-minor relationality (as conjoined by the relation of queer-ness to the world *and* the relation of Taiwanese-ness to the world) becomes an event of significance precisely through their inter-articulation on the periphery of world systems.

XU: Translation certainly has played an important role in the cross-cultural mediation of world literature. Qiu Miaojin's *Notes of a Crocodile* and *Letters from Montmartre*, for example, have been rendered available in English by incredible translators. I myself regularly teach *Notes of a Crocodile* in my classes. It is a compelling text. Another queer text Chi Ta-wei's *The Membranes* also just came out. Do you want to comment on the translation of Taiwan queer literature in other languages and its circulation in the world? And of course your own *Queer Taiwanese Literature: A Reader* is a seminal contribution of the canon of translated Taiwan queer literature. In addressing larger questions of translation and world literature, maybe you can also share with our audience members the stories behind this translation project.

CHIANG: I think both *Notes of a Crocodile* and *The Membranes* have also been translated into other European languages such as French, for example, but I have not looked at those editions in detail.

With respect to the stories behind this translation project, first, the project is the result of a collaboration between the National Museum of Taiwan Literature (國立臺灣文學館) and

Cambria Press, the publisher of the book. I was approached by Nikki Lin, a professor of Taiwanese literature at the National Taiwan Normal University, back in February 2020 about editing this reader. This is part of a larger ongoing project commissioned by the Museum to promote Taiwanese literature in the United States through translation (推動臺灣文學進入美國編譯出版計畫). That year, they decided to feature a book on LGBTQ-themed literature. The idea was to select a representative sample of short stories within a given word limit. I had about one year to oversee the translation, edit the manuscript, communicate with the authors and translators, write the introduction and finalize the translations. The book was indeed published in 2021, but it would have been impossible without the generous support – both financial and copy-editing – from Professor Lin's team at 師大 and 臺文館.

After the commissioning of the project comes the selection process. This was indeed perhaps the most challenging but also exciting part of the project. As you can imagine, there is a tension between generalization and specificity. By that I mean for this project to introduce LGBTQ stories to Anglophone readers, it is uneasy to stage the most exemplary themes in the Taiwanese queer experience, but at the same time speaking also to its diversity. Everyone, straight or queer, has a different life story to tell. What I decided to do is to try my best to showcase the exciting heterogeneity that has come to characterize queer Taiwan itself.

In the beginning of the selection process, I went back to the landmark anthology *Angelwings: Contemporary Queer Fiction from Taiwan*, edited and translated by Fran Martin in 2003. That collection includes ten stories written in the 1990s by those whom we may consider as 'trailblazers' of queer fictional writing. In thinking about how to enrich English translations of queer Taiwanese fiction, I spoke to a

few eminent colleagues, including Martin, but also Ari Heinrich, Chi Ta-wei and Sang Tze-lan, just to get some recommendations from them. In the end, I picked stories that reflect both generational and topical depth. Not only do the seven stories featured in this book span five decades from 1975 to 2020, but they also deal with various dimensions of sexual experience that bears a relationship to the category of 'lesbian and gay' in neither a protean nor an exclusive way. In this sense, the diversity of themes represented in the book highlights the way erotic desire intersects with other forms of social and cultural transgression: for example, readers will encounter the themes of bisexuality, asexuality, ageing, HIV/AIDS, indigeneity, recreational drug use, transgenderism, queer friendship and kinship, and assisted reproductive technology.

There was one story called '張偉' (1986) by Gu Zhaosen 顧肇森 that I had to let go, simply because we could not secure the necessary copyrights for translating and re-publishing this piece. Gu actually passed way in 1995 at the young age of forty-one. '張偉' was hugely popular in the 1980s and 1990s, and it is about a gay man pursuing his American Dream and trying to live like a homonormative gay man in the United States.

XU: We can take a cue from David Damrosch's definition of world literature as 'all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in the original language'. In this light, writers such as Qiu Miaojin have certainly arrived at the World Republic of Letters. However, such arrival bespeaks the cultural politics of world literature that often harbours certain power asymmetry and ideological tension. As Damrosch puts it, 'reception of texts has to do [more] with the American interests and needs than with genuine openness to other cultures'. As Taiwanese queer literature enters the global system of literary

circulation, how can we complicate this celebratory attitude by being critical of this *worlding process* and problematizing the ways in which Taiwan can be Orientalized by the West?

CHIANG: The historical context of translation matters. That is to say, there is a degree of urgency or timeliness – not predetermined by the original publication of the translated text – that animates the conditions of translation. We might ask: Why are translators, or readers for that matter, suddenly interested in the translation of *Notes of a Crocodile*, *Letters from Montmartre*, or *The Membranes*? Damrosch's point about 'Americana interest' is not the entire story, because the whole idea behind the Anglophone translation of these novels already presumes a sequence: from the original Mandarin Chinese text to its re-rendering in English. One way of problematizing this 'worlding process' is to avoid taking both sides of that sequential equation as equivalent or inevitable. We thus need to treat seriously the agency of the original authors *and* the decision of the translators and editors like myself. Oftentimes, as a historian, I consider questions of historical interest to be equally valuable for telling us something about our present-ness, even if the object of inquiry lives in the past tense.

At this juncture, for example, the fact that both Ari Heinrich and myself have elected to translate Ta-wei Chi's original text into English can be as much about *why* that original text is rendered meaningful in the present as it is about how the translation might bring us back to the time when the Mandarin version first appeared. This is something that Ta-wei might not have anticipated at the time of writing his original stories. As Peng Cheah as argued with respect to the cosmopolitanism of world literature, '[As something that is structurally detached from its putative origin and that permits and even solicits an infinite number of interpretations,] literature is an exemplary modality of the undecidability that opens the world.' Cheah continues, 'The

issue of receptibility is fundamental here. It does not refer to the reception of a piece of literature but to the structure of opening through which one receives a world and through which another world can appear.'[2] (What Cheah says specifically about literature, I think, applies to any kind of text from the past that informs narratives of historical knowledge.)

This unpredictable mutuality between the agency of the author and the decision of the translator/editor already frames this relationship as processual and historical in nature: alternatively put, translation satisfies not purely American interest, but a broader possibility for texts to become something other than its original formulation (also, Ta-wei is a Taiwan-based author, but he received his PhD at UCLA). In this respect, 'worlding' is not just the rendering of something in a new language, but translation itself is a historically productive process – constitutive of new ways of relating to a text, its fictive contexts and narrative techniques, and, above all, its 'world'. Rather than Orientalizing queer Taiwanese literature, then, these Anglophone translations of Qiu Miaojin and Chi Ta-wei are generating a new dialogue about global commensurability that is *not* supplementary to European language/interest, but necessitates the non-Western literary system to sit at the foundation of *how and why* we know.

XU: Related to the tension between the West and the Rest in the conception of world literature, which is a very Western-centric paradigm, graduate students in my seminar have been grappling with the epistemological gaps and ideological blind spots that undergird theories of world literature. We read Rey Chow's essay 'The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective'. In this essay, Chow draws upon Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and invites us to depart from the hegemonic and post-colonial presence of the West that

constantly haunts in our knowledge production as well as imaginary world-making process. In Chow's post-structuralist spirit, what work can queer Taiwanese literature perform that intervenes into the canon of world literature, or simply queer world literature?

CHIANG: I am so glad that you asked this question, because Rey Chow's work, though situated primarily in the discipline of comparative literature, has played a seminal role in shaping my approach to the history of science and gender/sexuality studies. In order to understand how queer Taiwanese literature engages with Rey Chow's post-structuralist theory, it is imperative that we first unpack her critical interventions. The essay that you mentioned is, in fact, an extension of an intellectual project that Rey Chow has been known to finesse and sustain with great success. There are many ways to 'enter' her project, but I just want to point out her argument about ethnic supplementarity, in part because this is related to my own work on queer and transgender history. For instance, there are books in trans history that bear universal titles (e.g. *Female Masculinity*, *Transgender History*, etc.), but they are all in fact just about United States and, to a lesser extent, European history. In contrast, for scholars like myself who deal with non-Western cultures, we are always expected to specify the geographical location of our study: publishers always expect us to include descriptors such as 'in China', 'in Japan', or 'Indian', 'Southeast Asian' and so forth in our book titles. Thus, the intellectual contribution of our work is reduced to a form of locational realism. This is what Rey Chow means by ethnic supplementarity: for every new theoretical trend, there can be a non-Western addition, or supplement, but works in Asian, Latin America, Middle Eastern, or African studies are never treated as the harbinger of new theoretical intervention. Dipesh Chakrabarty has proposed 'provincializing Europe' as a historiographical solution.

Building on that critique, the essay you mentioned cites Foucault's *The Order of Things* as an important historical framework for the rise of world/comparative literature. You might be glad to know that this book was also my bible in grad school, as it is a *tour de force* in dissecting the historical epistemology of the human sciences, so in some ways, we have come full circle to my interdisciplinary background. In any case, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault makes an intriguing observation about the progression from (what he calls) the Renaissance episteme to the Classical episteme to the modern episteme. In the sciences of life, for instance, tales of characteristic similitudes in animals in the Renaissance period became taxonomically ordered in natural history in the Classical era, and then were reconceptualized in a way in which man emerged as central to that science of organization in modern biology (e.g. the pivotal place of humanity in the idea of evolution).

Rey Chow points out that during the time when comparative/world literature emerged as a utopian vision in the nineteenth century, Europe functioned in two ways: (1) as a 'tabula' for the taxonomy, classification and organization of knowledge in relation to the rest of the world; and (2) as an 'operating table' for determining the power of language, or, to be more precise, multilingualism, as the *method* of literary studies. As such, the modus operandi of comparative literature can be characterized by 'Europe and Its Others'. Europe serves as 'the grid of reference, to which may be added others in a subsequent and subordinate fashion. An outcome of this kind of comparison is an often asymmetrical distribution of cultural capital and intellectual labor, so that cultures of Europe (the grid), such as French and German, tend to be studied with meticulousness while cultures on the margins of Europe, such as those in Latin America, Africa, or Asia, even when they are differentiated by unique, mutually unintelligible linguistic traditions, may simply be considered examples of

the same geographical areas (and hence not warranting comparative study).'[3]

She then juxtaposes a perspective she terms 'post-European' against this norm. She characterizes this alternative perspective through a differential conjunction: 'Post-European Culture and the West'. The idea here is to think about the lateral multicultural comparisons between, say, South Asia, postcolonial Africa, Japan and Spanish America, however uneven the notion of the West continues to operate in such comparisons. This is indicative of how various non-Western languages have been assigned cultural capital in asymmetrical ways in the enterprise of comp lit. Towards the end of her essay, Rey Chow cites Harry Harootunian's work to hint at a future in which comparative practices would dislodge the 'and' from her formulation, 'Post-European Culture and the West'.

This is one potential point of entry where queer Taiwanese literature can intervene. First, Taiwanese literature's relation to world literature is often mediated through the category of Chinese literature (we can say the same thing about history: Taiwanese history's relation to global history is often routed through the familiar frame of Chinese history). This suggests that the spectre of empire and imperial hegemony here is not *only* the West, but also China. If the object of Rey Chow's critique comes down to the 'operating table' of European literature, we can very much say that Taiwanese literature faces a dual structure of hegemony: the Western canon and the Chinese canon. In this sense, by talking about queer Taiwanese literature as world literature, we are drawing attention to not only a 'Post-European Culture and the West' comparison, but also a 'Post-Chinese Culture and the East'. (World historians such as Kenneth Pomerantz, in fact, have already urged us to treat China and Europe as comparable objects of study in terms of scale, size, population and periodization.)

Moreover, through translation, Taiwanese literature helps us to rethink what we mean by queer world literature, because it questions the sequential equivalence falsely assumed between an original Mandarin Chinese text (regrettably, this ignores Austronesian cultural production in indigenous Taiwan) and its Anglophone re-iteration. By that I mean we can appreciate the *work* that queer Taiwanese literature in translation is doing in a different way, such as by considering the original text as already catalysing a new 'world' of literary affinity, rather than simply acting as an afterthought of the translation process. In other words, we are not paying attention to Ta-wei's work because it has been translated, but the translation is made possible only as a result of the world-making force of Ta-wei's writing. That is, as I have been suggesting, queer Taiwanese literature is not just 'entering' a pre-defined world republic of letters, but through its very presence, queer Taiwanese literature indicates a loss through incorporation, a void that occupies, and an absence that exists in re-defining the very world from which it is thought to have been excluded.

This is especially important especially for queer cultural studies, because we often wrestle with the usefulness of 'queer' as a category of analysis. Yet, I think that the presence of queer people and cultures across time and space since the beginning of human civilization is perhaps the most boring fact of life. The interesting task concerns the *reasons* and *ways in which* we enable queer people and culture to come into view, whether our gaze is focused on the past or other non-Western societies. As both a void and a presence, then, the relationship between Taiwan and global queerness is always already at stake when cultural texts move across linguistic or geographical borders. To sum up, queer Taiwanese literature as a coeval construction disrupts two normative sequences: the idea that 'queerness' emerges out of the West and is then disseminated to the rest of the world (e.g. Stonewall narrative), and the

assumption that (a straight) Taiwan at some point in time finally *enters* a pre-existing world of queerness.

XU: The notion of the world can feel very disembodied and removed from our immediate lives. I would like to bring us back to this specific locale, that is, Santa Barbara, and acknowledge how this place has played a prominent role in the history of queer Taiwanese literature or the global circulation of Taiwan literature. To that effect, I have to acknowledge the work of my two retired colleagues at UCSB, Professors Pai Hsien-yung and Tu Kuo-Ch'ing. Pai's queer novel *Crystal Boys*, which was written here when he was teaching here in Santa Barbra, is arguably the first Chinese-language novel that places non-normative queer desire front and centre. What do you think is the significance of this novel in the history of queer Taiwan literature or Taiwan literature in general? What changes do you see in the younger generations of queer Taiwanese writers such as Chi Ta-wei that signal a cultural shift away from Pai's queer literature?

CHIANG: I think the best book to turn to for something like this is Ta-wei Chi's 同志文學史, because Ta-wei historicizes *Crystal Boys* in remarkable and insightful detail. Not only does Ta-wei show that there are in fact a huge body of queer fiction written in Mandarin Chinese before *Crystal Boys* (though, none of them carried the same length as *Crystal Boys*, so it's likely correct to call it the first Chinese 'novel' devoted to the theme of homosexuality), but he also shows why *Crystal Boys* came to stand for an 'epistemic break' in the Foucauldian sense. Most significantly, it has to do with the relationship between homosexuality and the family. The plot of *Crystal Boys* carries the message that in order to claim a queer identity and become a 'human' (rather than subhuman) in society, one has to abandon or leave one's natal family (what Ta-wei calls 霸家作人). Prior to *Crystal*

Boys, homoerotic stories almost never put such a strong spotlight on this theme, but since the 'epic arrival' of *Crystal Boys*, the issue of queers' relation to family has occupied a central place in the decade following its first appearance in 現代文學 in 1977.

Another important reading comes from Hans Huang 黃道明, who, in his book *Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan*, stresses the connection between male prostitution and homosexuality in certain enclaves of urban Taipei (New Park or Wanhua District). But the later reclaiming of the novel by the *tongzhi* movement (and especially evident in the remaking of the story into a TV series) completely 'sanitized' this historical connection.

Both Chi and Huang's readings remind us that our impression of *Crystal Boys* has often been interlaced with the changing political interest over time. The place of Pai's classic novel in contemporary reading culture has as much been shaped by the discourses about the book as it has dealt with the narrative content itself. I think queer writers in Taiwan like Chi and even younger ones have begun to experiment with new topics and narrative strategies not present in Pai's classic novel.

XU: Let's also talk about the work of my other colleague Professor Tu Kuo-ching, who is an important poet in his own right. But he has been translating Taiwanese literature into English for the past 25 years. Anyone who personally knows him will be moved by his incredible commitment to this cause, that is, translating Taiwanese literature and unmistakably registering the sovereignty and prominence of Taiwan literature in the world. Have you followed the work done in the journal founded by Tu? Also, as we live in this increasingly mediated world, what are the limitations of traditional print mediums such as the journal in the circulation of world literature? What is the place of new media?

CHIANG: Absolutely. I talked about having to drop Gu Zhaosen's 'Zhang Wei' from the volume due to copyrights concerns. There was another story that I had to let go: 'The Season When Flowers Bloom' 花開時節 (1942) by 楊千鶴 (Chiang Ho Yung), and it is one of the most famous stories about female same-sex love in the era of Japanese rule. But because the story was already translated and had appeared in the journal *Taiwan Literature: English Translation Series* edited by Tu Kuo-ching and published here at UCSB, I decided to devote the space to other stories that have not been translated.

By the way, a copy of the English translation of 'The Season When Flowers Bloom' is available online. One can access the journal on the website of the UCSB Center for Taiwan Studies. So I think there is something beneficial here for opening up modes of circulation beyond the traditional print mediums.

Another genre of literature that has become very popular is web fiction. With respect to queer literature, the example of *Beijing Story* 北京故事 (1998) is telling. The origin story of this internet novel is that the author could not find a publisher in mainland China to publish the story. But due to this very censorship, I'd probably say that its online publication format had made an even larger impact on readership (it already exceeds national geographical borders). The turning of this film into the famous movie, *Lan Yu* 藍宇 (2001), is even more interesting. The director 關錦鵬 (Stanley Kwan) later revealed that he was only able to film the movie in Tiananmen because he pitched the film as an independent Hong Kong production. This really brings us to a transnational Sinophone context in which the film and the web fiction have been mutually transformed. The film continues to be banned in mainland China, and we can reasonably suspect that the reason for this censorship has as

much to do with the staging of the Tiananmen Square protest as the representation of queer sexuality.

XU: In *Queer Taiwanese Literature: A Reader*, we see that female-female homosexuality intersects with indigeneity, surrogacy, coming-of-age, and legal issues, without the need for an objectifying 'male gaze'. Would you like to talk about the unique challenges faced by lesbian/non-binary partnerships in Taiwan today, as opposed to exclusively male-male relationships?

CHIANG: This is an interesting question, because I think that female, or non-male, viewpoints have featured so strongly in the history of *tongzhi* literature. I tried to do justice to the range of literary representation from the angle you suggested. I hope readers will be able to see that in *Queer Taiwanese Literature*. If you consider the trajectory of writing by someone like Chen Xue, there is a distinct sense that the challenges and opportunities that lesbians face have evolved over time. The fact that in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Chen Xue can write about lesbian surrogacy and queer friendships so explicitly (and imaginatively) suggests that with the passage of time, authors like her engage with contemporary events differently. I suspect that these themes were not high on her radar in the 1990s when her queer writings became a Sinophone classic. This reflects a direct engagement with the changing political nature of the context in which lesbian authors write.

XU: The story 'Muakai' by Dadelavan Ibau (translated by Kyle Shernuk) in this volume provides an indigenous Paiwanese perspective on queerness. Have you encountered other queer stories bridging Han and other ethnic identities and do you think these stories embody a unique chronotype? The question of indigeneity is an important one; it points out the sense of structural (queer or

otherwise) trauma in Taiwan that arose from settler colonialism. Stylistically, the story ‘Muakai’ is remarkable in that it weaves together a modernist aesthetic and indigenous knowledge and imagination. The intersection of queerness and indigeneity performs important cultural work, because it deconstructs the heteronormative and Han-centric regime of power and representation in Taiwan. When the notion of World Literature often evokes the framework of national literature, what critical interventions can the intersection of queer studies and indigenous studies launch to challenge the conceptual and political assumptions of world literature?

CHIANG: This is an interesting question. There is a coincidence here. Actually, *Crystal Boys* features at least two indigenous characters – 鐵牛 and 原始人阿雄仔 – and in fact, interested readers would encounter the same name 阿雄 (also an indigenous character) in one of Pai’s earlier stories 滿天裡亮晶晶的星星 (‘A Sky Full of Blazing Stars’). In comparison, though, Ibau’s ‘Muakai’ is perhaps the first fiction published in Mandarin Chinese about queer indigeneity *written by an indigenous author*. One point of difference is that most of the other works in which an indigenous character has appeared, they are rarely given the subjectivity (or opportunity) ‘to speak’ on their own behalf. It is only in a work written by an indigenous author, like Ibau, that we ‘hear’ the voices of indigenous queers.

I am also glad that you raised this question, because later this week I am co-hosting a conference on ‘Queering Taiwan Studies’ at UCLA. At the conference, we have several papers devoted to the themes of queer indigeneity and racial capitalism. The intersection between queer studies and indigenous studies is something that I have been thinking a great deal about, not just from a literary perspective but also from the viewpoint of Taiwanese history and activism. To go

back to your question regarding world literature, though, we can envision a different world that connects Austronesian Taiwan and native America. This relationship between two minor cultures corresponds to what François Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have called ‘minor transnationalism’. Relatedly, we might even envision an alternative world in which the very concept of literature might be called into question, because the cultural footprints of indigenous communities may look very different from the dominant literary paradigms of Han Chinese.

XU: One paradigm-setting field that has been influential for the past two decades or so is Sinophone Studies. You have been doing important work in giving Sinophone Studies a queer lens. How do you envision the future as Sinophone studies and queer studies continue to intersect?

CHIANG: First, let me briefly explain what Sinophone studies is, where it came from, and what it intends to do. We can understand Sinophone studies as an interdisciplinary field that explores Sinitic-language communities and cultures worldwide, but especially in locations and cultures outside or on the margins of China and Chineseness. For many actors in the Sinophone world, the label of ‘Chinese’ simply does not work. This label confuses language with culture, nation-state, and politics and tends to impose Han Chinese essentialism on diasporic subjects. The new paradigm of Sinophone studies was pioneered by the literary scholar Shu-mei Shih, who argued that continental colonialism, settler colonialism and migration serve as the three main historical processes whereby global Sinophone communities and cultures have taken shape. It should be noted that before Sinophone studies came along, other scholars have interrogated the contested meanings of Chineseness in both history and cultural studies. Tu Wei-Ming proposed the notion of cultural China to pull our

attention away from an obsession with political China; Wang Gungwu offered an extensive deconstruction of the notion of Chineseness; Ien Ang questioned assumptions about one's identity and Chineseness through language, race and cultural profile; and, as we saw, Rey Chow has interrogated the disciplinary politics of Chineseness in area studies and beyond. Sinophone studies is all the more urgent and timely for our scholarly world today, because it acknowledges the Chinese empire as a political reality and makes evident its operation in scholarly discourses. On the one hand, Sinophone studies maintains a critical distance towards the concept of diaspora; on the other, it also critiques the way China-centrism permeates East Asian studies, such as when the framework of 'Chinese studies' continues to haunt the study of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and so forth.

In the second chapter of my book, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*, I discuss a number of reasons why the intersection of queer theory and Sinophone studies offers a generative space for the study of cultural history. Above all, the merging of the two critical lenses allows us to scrutinize the co-production of heteronormativity and Sinocentrism. One obvious example, as we discussed earlier, is that the Sinophone lens licenses a more robust historicization of the way *tongzhi* has been translated in queer history (again, *tongzhi* cinema in Hong Kong and *tongzhi* literature in Taiwan). Another important lesson is that Sinophone studies cautions against the romanticization of China and Asia nativism by reminding us that neoliberal capitalism in China is neither exceptional nor exemplary. Shifting our framework from 'Chinese' history to 'Sinophone' history also calls attention to different turning points in modern East Asia. Rather than 1911, 1949, or 1976 – these are conventional divides in modern Chinese history – we begin to pay attention to 1987 (lifting of Martial Law in Taiwan), 1989 (Tiananmen Square protest in Beijing) and 1997 (handover of Hong Kong). Because there is very little room for exploring

the richness of these latter turning points in historical discourses sanctioned by the Chinese state, Sinophone theory foregrounds place-based discussions across temporal and spatial diversity of the Sinophone world. I predict that the most vibrant work in queer Sinophone studies in the near future will engage with the frameworks of indigenous studies and comparative racialization, and these discussions are an extension of an existing concern with minor-to-minor forms of relation and transnationalism.

Notes

1 Fran Martin, ed., *Angelwings: Contemporary Queer Fiction from Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 5.

2 Peng Cheah, 'What Is a World? On World Literature as World-Making Activity', *Daedalus* 137, no. 2 (2008): 26–38, on 35.

3 Rey Chow, 'The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective', *ELH* 71, no. 2 (2004): 289–311, on 294.

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